THE SKELETON AND OTHER STORIES

The Skeleton (Pinjar), according to the novelist, lays bare the very inside of the characters Pooro, the heroine, is abducted during the pre-Partition holocaust, held captive, tyrannized, and forcibly converted into the captor's religion. In the end when she gets an opportunity to escape she feels no need for it. She had by then begun to love her abductor.

Amrita Pritam writes her prose lyrically ; only she can cram so much life unto a single page. *The Skeleton*, translated by Khushwant Singh, is now being made into a feature film.

Poet, novelist, story-writer and critic, Amrita Pritam is one of the first recipients of the Sahitya Akademi Award in Punjabi. She has published over fifty books of fiction, poetry, biography and folk-songs Her readership remains formidable as ever.

Amrita Pritam

THE SKELETON

The Skeleton

THE SKY WAS A colourless grey. Pooro sat on her haunches with a sack spread beneath her feet. She was shelling peas. She pressed open a pod and pushed out the row of peas with her finger. A slimy, little slug stuck to her thumb. She felt as if she had stepped into a cesspool; she clenched her teeth, flicked off the slug and rubbed her hands between her knees.

Pooro stared at the three heaps in front of her : the empty husks, the pods, and the peas she had shelled. She put her hand on heart and continued to look vacantly into space. She felt as if her body was a pea-pod inside which she carried a slimy, white caterpillar. Her body was unclean. If only she could take the worm out of her womb and fling it away! Pick it out with her nails as if it were a thorn ! Pluck it off as if it were a maggot or a leech...'

Pooro stared at the blank wall facing her. Memories of the days past came crowding into her mind.

- Pooro belonged to a family of money-lenders of Chatto village. Although they had given up money-lending for some generations, they continued to be described as *Sahukars*. They had seen bad days and

at one time been compelled to sell their kitchen utensils on which the names of their forefathers were engraved. Pooro's father and uncle could not bear any more disgrace. They left the village and went to Thailand. There the wheel of fortune turned in their favour. At that time Pooro was a little girl of nine. Besides her, there was a baby boy still in his mother's arms. Then her father came back, cleared the mortgage on the house (the capital and compound interest were more than the price of a new house), saved his ancestral home from attachment by creditors and so wiped off the disgrace. He sold whatever grain and fodder he had raised on his land and returned to Thailand. But this time he left behind a home the family could call its own and a name it could be proud of. When he returned to the village the next time, Pooro was fourteen years old. There was also her younger brother and succeeding him, three younger sisters. Her mother was expecting her sixth child.

The first thing Pooro's parents did on their return to Chatto was to find a young man—the son of a well-to-do family in the neighbouring village, Rattoval—for the hand of their daughter. Pooro's mother only awaited the birth of her own new baby. As soon as she had had her ritual bath, she planned to arrange her daughter's wedding. Pooro's parents were resolved to lighten themselves of the burden of a daughter.

Pooro's fiance was both handsome and intelligent. His parents owned the only house in the village which had a penthouse of solid bricks; it had the word *Om* inscribed on the balcony. They also

owned three buffaloes. Pooro's father presented the boy's parents with five silver rupees and a piece of candy sugar and so "booked" him for his daughter. In those days it was customary amongst the Hindus of the region to make matrimonial exchanges, so, despite the fact that Pooro's brother was barely twelve, he was engaged to her fiance's sister, who was a little child.

Pooro's mother had had three daughters in succession with only two years between them. She had had enough daughters, and now that fortune was smiling on them once again and they had plenty to eat and sufficient to wear, she wished that her next child should be another son She had offered prayers to the Holy Mother. The women of the village brought cowdung and made an idol in her courtyard. They covered the head of the idol with a bright, red veil bordered with gold, and pinned a tiny gold nose-stud in its nostril. All of them chanted in chorus.

Holy Mother, be cross when you come !
Holy Mother, be happy when you go !

The village folk believed that it was the Holy Mother who determined the sex of a new-born child. If she was gay and full of laughter, it implied that she was on good terms with her husband. In that case she would quickly make a girl-child and rush back to her spouse. On the other hand, if she were in a sullen mood, it implied that she had quarrelled with her husband and would be in no hurry to get back to him. She would then stay long time and patiently make the child into a boy. The women repeated their chant :

Holy Mother, be cross when you come !
Holy Mother, be happy when you go !

The Holy Mother was apparently close by and heard the chanting of the women. A fortnight later Pooro's mother gave birth to a baby boy. There was much rejoicing. Even distant relatives of the family received felicitations from their friends and neighbours. All that worried Pooro's mother now was that the boy was a *trikhal,* because he had come after three girls, and so might be ill-starred : they either died young or shortened the lives of their brothers or parents. So the women had to get together again to appease the Holy Mother. They made a hole in a large metal plate, passed the baby through it twice and chanted :

There comes a legion of trikhals—
A legion of trikhals !

After these rituals, the mother felt assured that her son, though a *trikhal,* would live.

Pooro was now fifteen. She felt a strange upsurge of blood in her limbs. Her breasts burgeoned ; her *kameez* became too tight for her. She bought calico prints from a neighbouring market and had new ones made. She also got a new set of *dupattas* to match. She had them thickly sprinkled with silvery mica.

Pooro's girl friends had pointed out her fianc Ram Chand, to her ; the lad's features became im printed on Pooro's mind. Whenever she recall his face, a deep blush came to her cheeks.

Pooro was not allowed to go out of her hor by herself. There was a lot of coming and goi between the two neighbouring villages and l

mother feared that people from Ram Chand's village might see her daughter. There was another reason to be cautious—the Muslims had become very aggressive. Hindu girls never ventured out except in the broad daylight of the afternoon.

Pooro often went across her father's fields and strayed on to the footpath connecting the two villages. She loitered in the neighbouring lots, on the pretext of picking spinach. Sometimes she would go to the *jamun* tree, shake its branches and spend a long time gathering its fruit. She would keep her friends engaged in gossip while her eyes watched the footpath which led to Ram Chand's village. She prayed that Ram Chand might come that way, so that she could have a good look at him. The very thought would set her heart beating faster. And then her night would be spent in dreaming of the youth who was soon to become her husband.

* * *

One day when Pooro went out with her friends, she *wore her new pair of slippers which cut into her* heels. Her feet hurt, she began to lag behind. Her friends turned back to the village. The twilight began to deepen across the sky like a mass of molten lead. The footpath ran in a zig-zag path through fallow land, passed under groves of *peepul* trees and then skirted clusters of bushes. Pooro saw her friends a long way ahead of her. A large blister had come up on her right heel. She took off her slippers and hurried barefoot.

The girls had teased Pooro that her right foot hurt because her right side was heavier than her left. They

ad said that her right hand was also bigger than the left. "You will see when the wedding bangles are slipped on your arms," said they mischievously. She saw it all taking place before her eyes: the girls forcing red ivory bangles on to her arms; the bigger sliding on easily; the smaller slipping on the left arm but unable to go over the right hand. The barber, whose job it was, would grease her wrist with oil and try to force her hand through the ivory bangle. Would it stand the strain? The bangle was the symbol of marital bliss. If one broke, it was a sure sign of disaster to come—perhaps of an early widowhood. Pooro looked angrily at her right hand. She prayed that Ram Chand would live to a great age—to a hundred thousand years or more.

Pooro was lost in her thoughts. A man suddenly emerged from behind a *peepul* tree and stood in the middle of the path, barring her way. It was the Muslim lad, Rashida. He was a powerfully built youth in his early twenties. His lips were curled in a mischievous smile. His eyes were glued on Pooro's still unformed breasts.

Pooro screamed and ran past Rashida. When she caught up with her friends on the outskirts of the village she was out of breath and terrified.

"Was it a boy or a tiger?" the girls teased her. Pooro was too distracted to reply. "You are a little ninny!" said one of them. "You are lucky it wasn't a bear! A tiger eats up its victim. A bear is said to take a woman to his cave and behave towards her as if she were its wife."

The girls burst out laughing.

Pooro shuddered at the prospect. The unfortu

wretch who had to lie with a bear! The more she thought of it, the paler she became. She saw Rashida's hairy, powerful form and glowing eyes. She heard the laughter of her friends disappear down the village lane.

Two days later Pooro went out to the fields to pick radish beans. She plucked a handful and went to a neighbouring well. She washed the beans and put a tender one in her mouth. She heard a sound and looked up. Rashida was standing by the trunk of a tree staring at her. Pooro felt the blood drain from her legs.

"Why the fear, beautiful? I am your slave" Rashida had the same mischievous smile as before on his face.

Rashida looked like an enormous grizzly bear. Would he stretch out his arms and with his big claws draw her into an embrace? Would he caress her neck with his sharp nails? Would he drag her to his cave and...?

Two peasants came along the path. Even that did not put off Rashida. He stayed where he was, with a lecherous grin on his face. Pooro fled to her home.

Pooro said nothing about these encounters to her parents. Her friends advised her that it was not the sort of thing one told one's father or mother. They told her that all men stared at young women and described themselves as their servants or slaves; one should not take that sort of nonsense too seriously. Let the men talk and yap! Did people stop walking on the roads for fear of the dogs' barking at them?

Pooro's wedding day was drawing near. Her father had hoarded tins of ghee and sacks of flour to feed

guests. Her mother had filled a wooden chest with embroidered *dupattas* and dresses of pure silk she had brought from Thailand. Her finger-tips had become sore crinkling the *dupattas*. The out-house was all a glitter with brass utensils to be given away in the dowry. Pooro had herself got together small pieces of embroidery to make her bedspread. She made wickerwork baskets and *moorhas* with her own hands.

* * *

One evening while her mother was giving her breast to her baby son, Pooro decided to cook spinach. She picked tender leaves of *sarson*, sliced them into tiny bits and washed them twice. She scrubbed the saucepan with a bundle of coarse string and put the spinach into it. She added chick-peas till the sauce-pan was full up to the brim and put it on a gentle fire to simmer. She pushed more faggots under the saucepan.

Pooro was like her mother's right hand; she could cook and look after the home without much effort. Pooro's mother saw her daughter busy with the coo-ing. A deep sigh escaped the mother's lips. S would soon be losing her; then her home would lo utterly empty. Her eyes filled with tears. She be to sing a daughter's lament:

O Mother of mine, clasp me to your bosom
And answer just one question.
Tell me not a long tale.
Tell me why you bore me
If tonight we have to part?

The mother's voice choked with emotion and she began to sob. She controlled her sobs and started again in a faltering voice :

I have got out my spinning-wheel,
I have my wads of cotton,
I'll spin sheets with square patterns.
To sons are given homes and palaces;
Daughters are exiled to foreign lands.

Pooro ran up to her mother and clasped her by the knees. Mother and daughter burst into tears.

The afternoon shadows had begun to lengthen across the courtyard. It occurred to Pooro's mother that they had only cooked one vegetable and it would be embarrassing if someone were to turn up unexpectedly from her daughter's fiance's family. She asked Pooro to get a handful of okra beans from the fields.

Pooro had an uneasy feeling in her mind. She took one of her little sisters with her. She plucked okra and radish beans and the two turned back homeward. From behind her came the sound of horse-hoofs in full gallop. Before she could get off the footpath she felt something hit her violently on her right shoulder. She reeled under the blow; she felt a human arm entwine about her waist and lift her into the air. She found herself lying across horse's saddle.

Pooro's shrieks faded into the distance as the horse and rider flew across the fields of Chatto village.

Pooro did not know from where the horse had come, nor who was the man riding it ;.she did not know how far she had been carried. She had lost

consciousness, and when she came to senses she found herself on a *charpoy* in a room with the door shut. She banged her forehead against the walls and hammered the door with her bare hands till she fell exhausted. She felt someone rub hot ghee on her scalp. For a moment she believed it was her mother beside her pillow. An agonised cry escaped her lips : "Amma !"

"My sins be forgiven me ! Speak to me just once!" said a voice beside her. Pooro raised her fevered head. It was Rashida. She shrieked and fell back unconscious on her *charpoy*. She dreamed she was in a cave. A black bear was combing her hair with its claws. She shrank in size, while the bear grew bigger and bigger. The bear took her in its shaggy embrace...

Pooro opened her eyes and stared vacantly at the ceiling. Someone was rubbing the soles of her feet. He gently pressed her shoulders and with his hands poured water between her lips. He put a teaspoonful of hot *ghee* mixed with *gur* into her mouth. She took a sip and spat out the rest.

She sat up on the *charpoy*. "Where am I ?"

"You are with me." was his simple reply. He sat on a wooden stool in front of her. He had lowered his eyes ; he did not have the courage to look Pooro in the face.

"Why have you brought me here ?" asked Pooro boldly.

"I will tell you another time," he replied and went out of the room leaving the door ajar.

Pooro saw a small courtyard leading to another room and with an entrance on to the street. She got up from the *charpoy*. Her legs shook beneath her.

She walked round the room, examining the walls. After a while she ventured out into the courtyard. In one corner there was a heap of ashes. Beside the heap were a baking plate, a brass pot and a saucepan. In a niche in the wall was a pitcher of water. She could not see any sign of life.

With faltering steps she went towards the entrance. The door was shut as firmly as her own fate. Pooro put her head against the door, but it refused to be moved by her sorrowing face or by her tears. She screwed up all her courage and beat upon the door with her hands. It did not give in, nor did her hammering attract anyone's attention. She peered through the crevices. Outside was a vast stretch of open ground. She could see no houses, huts or hovels or any sign of life. She wiped her face with the hem of her shirt and turned back. She poured out the water from the pitcher into her palm and splashed it in her eyes.

The door opened. Rashida entered and bolted itfrom inside. He put a double padlock on the door.

"Pooro, why waste so much time and energy? Come inside and have something to eat. You have had nothing for two days," said Rashida. He did not try to take her by the hand. He did not even look lecherously at her.

"Rashida, have pity on me! Take me back to my people!" Pooro clasped his feet.

Rashida picked her up and took her in his powerful arms. "Who will quench the fire in my heart?" he asked. Pooro tried to free herself, but could not get out of his embrace.

The day passed—and the night. The door remained closed; with Rashida guarding it like a sentinel. After some days he began to take her out for a few minutes before down and after twilight. Pooro saw that their hut was in the middle of a large orchard. It was probably meant for the gardener, but she did not see or hear anyone tending the fruit. The days were long—the nights endless. She was however, grateful that Rashida had not said a harsh word to her and her honour was unsullied. He took as little notice of her entreaties as he did of her curses.

By her own reckoning she had spent a full fortnight in the prison.

One day Rashida brought a silk dress of bright red and placed it in front of Pooro. He told her bluntly: "Tomorrow you have to wear this; a *maulvi* will be coming to perform our *nikah*. Be ready in time." He continued in his matter-of-fact tone, "Woman, that which has not happened yet must now come to pass."

Pooro again fell at Rashida's feet and pleaded with him. He remained unmoved. "Pooro, your entreaties will not make the slightest difference. Do not make me feel as if I had committed a murder. I swear by Allah, I cannot bear to see you crying all the time."

"Tell me, in the name of your Allah, why did you do this to me?" she asked.

"Maybe we were man and wife in a previous life," he replied naively. "But why do you bother your head with such things? What was to happen has happened. I promise that no harm will come to you for the rest of your life." He continued, after a

pause, "Did you know that our families, the *Shaikhs* and the *Sahukars*, have been at loggerheads for many generations ? Your grandfather had advanced us Rs. 500 on compound interest and taken as mortgage our house. We could not redeem the mortgage. He attached our house and had the entire *Shaikh* family ejected. We were rendered homeless. That was not all. His agents used foul language towards our womenfolk, and your uncle kept my father's sister in his house for three nights—within the knowledge of your grandfather ! The *Shaikhs* were then like a bundle of sugarcane from which all the juice had been squeezed out. They wept bitter tears of blood and bided their time. My grandfather made my uncles swear that they would avenge these insults. When we heard of the plans for your wedding, there was talk of a settling of old scores. They picked on me ; they made me take an oath on the Koran that I would abduct the *Sahukar's* daughter before she was wed."

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Pooro heard the story of her fate with resignation. Rashida continued : "Allah is my witness that on the very first day I cast my eyes on you, I fell in love with you. It was my love and the prodding of the *Shaikh* clan that made me do this. But I cannot bear to see you so sad."

"If my uncle abducted your aunt, what fault was that of mine ? You have reduced me to a homeless vagrant." Pooro held her head between her hands ; her face was wet with tears.

"That is exactly what I told my uncles,

they taunted me."

"And at their instigation you took my life !" cried oro.

"Pooro, I will put the world at your feet," said ashida in a voice full of emotion. "I will love you s long as I live. I will not behave the way your ncle behaved towards my aunt."

"Rashida, let me see my mother once."

"Good woman, you have no place in that family any more ! If they let you in even once, not one of their Hindu friends or relatives will take a drop of water in their house. And you have been with me full fifteen days."

"I have only eaten your food and drunk your water. I...." Pooro could not put the rest into words.

"Who will believe it ? I will first marry you and only then...." Rashida looked up nervously at the girl.

Pooro thought of what her wedding was to b ke. She would have bathed in oil ar nassaged with a stick of turmeric ; her arms wou ave been loaded with red ivory bangles, and tasse ed strings of cowrie-shells would have been tied her wrists. She would have worn a dress of p silk ; she would have ridden to Ram Chand's h in a palanquin ; she would have been the wo most beautiful bride...and then....

"My parents must have had a terrible time." said at last.

"I suppose they cried and beat their breasts same way as my grandfather and my uncle have done when my aunt was taken,"

Rashida without much pity in his voice; then he added with a cynical smile: "The police have been searching for you but have reported that they could not find any clue. How could they? They have taken exactly Rs. 500 from us. We have the upper hand now; most of the villagers are Muslims; no Hindu dare raise his eyes before us. They are lucky their lives and property are safe. They know that if they want to keep their heads on their shoulders, they had better stay quiet." There was bitterness in Rashida's voice. Perhaps the old fire of revenge was not extinct.

Hate welled up in Pooro's heart as she heard Rashida's words. He had robbed her of her birthright; he had robbed her of her future. Her parents had probably given her up for lost and left the village.

"Have my parents left for Thailand?" she asked quietly.

"Not yet."

"How far are we from my village?" she asked.

"Not very far. But don't even dream of going to Chatto. When things settle down, I will take you there myself. Perhaps after six months or so."

* * *

That morning Pooro planned her escape. To avoid suspicion, she ate all the sweet rice and curry Rashida brought for her. At night she stole the key of the door from beneath his pillow. Later, when he was fast asleep, she quietly unlocked the door and stepped out of her prison.

The pitch black of the night terrified her; she almost turned back. She was not sure if she would be able

to find her way to Chatto. She might fall into the hands of some rustic worse than Rashida ! Then the faces of her mother, brothers and sisters came before her eyes. She took the path she believed led to her home. The dim light of the coming dawn made the landscape somewhat clearer. She found herself on the right path and saw the outlines of her village.

Now the die was cast. She used all her strength and began to run. She came to the village and reached the lane that led to her home. The sky had not turned grey when she found herself before her father's threshold.

Pooro rattled the chain. The door opened from the other side and she fell on the courtyard. She had used up all her strength; as soon as she reached the winning-post she had collapsed. She lay on the mud floor moaning like a wounded animal. She found her parents standing above her with oil lamps in their hands; she saw tears streaming from her mother's eyes. She felt her mother take her in her arms and clasp her to her bosom, as a cry of anguish broke from her heart.

"The neighbours will hear. There will be a crowd," warned her father. Pooro's mother stuffed her mouth with the hem of her shirt.

"Daughter, this fate was ordained for you; we are helpless." Pooro heard her father's voice. She clung to her mother. "The *Shaikhs* will descend on us and destroy everything we have."

"Take me to Thailand with you !" cried Pooro.

"Who will marry you now ? You have lost your religion and your birthright. If we dare to help you, we will be wiped out without a trace of blood left

behind to tell of our fate."

"Then destroy me with your own hands."

"Daughter, it were better if you had died at birth! If the Shaikhs find you here they will kill your father and your brothers. They will kill all of us," said the mother, hardening her heart.

Pooro remembered Rashida's words: "You have no place in that home now." But what about her fiance, Ram Chand? What was the difference between being engaged and being married? Why had not he bothered to come to her help? There was one hope for her: escape in death

Pooro got up and went out of the door. Neither her mother nor her father tried to stop her. When she had come this way earlier, she had believed she was returning to life; she had wanted to live again, to be with her mother and father. She had come full of hope. Now she had no hope, nor any tear. What more could anyone take from her than life? The thought dried up all her tears.

Rashida came running breathlessly towards her. Pooro stopped in her footsteps. Even death had slammed the door in her face. Rashida grabbed her by the arm. She followed him without a word.

The third day the *Maulvi* came with another two or three men. They performed Pooro's marriage ceremony with Rashida. A few days later Rashida told her that her parents had left for Thailand.

Rashida's parents were dead. He had no sisters, only brothers and uncles. He decided to leave his village for another, called Sakkar, a few miles away, where a distant cousin, Rahima, had some land. He could exchange some of his land with Rahima's land

make his home there. He told Pooro of his plans. There was no reaction from her—after her parents had turned her away from their door, leaving the ancestral village did not seem so momentous. All said and done, what difference did it make? All villages were alike.

Rashida packed his odds and ends in a few steel trunks and set out for Sakkar. Pooro followed him as the blind follows a guide. They found a small house some distance from Rahima's. The first relations of Rashida's that Pooro met were the women of Rahima's household. They did not pester her with many questions; they only wanted to find out if she needed anything for her new home and whether they could be of any help. Nevertheless, Pooro felt like a stray calf in a strange herd of cows.

There were more changes in store for her. Till then Rashida had called her by her proper Hindu name. One day he brought a stranger with him and asked his wife to stretch out her arm. The man tattooed on it the new name she had been given when she was married to Rashida. From that day "Hamida" was not only inscribed on her skin in dark green letters but everyone began to call her by that name.

In her dreams, when she met her old friends and played in her parents' home, everyone still called her Pooro. At other times she was Hamida. It was a double life: Hamida by day, Pooro by night. In reality, she was neither one nor the other; she was just a skeleton, without a shape or a name.

Six months later tiny life began to stir inside her frame.

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The sky was a colourless grey. Hamida sat on her haunches with a piece of sacking between her feet and her eyes fixed on space.

Rashida came from the front door into the courtyard. The sound of his footsteps did not reach her ears, nor the sight of his form register on her eyes. She was like a statue. Rashida sat down beside her, put his arm round her shoulders and began tenderly, "Woman of God...."

Hamida did not move away. After a long time she said, "I feel something stabbing inside me."

"You never go out nor meet anyone." Rashida remarked after a while. "Being alone all the time is bound to depress you."

"Where can I go to? Whom am I related to except you?" she replied with great bitterness.

Rashida did not say anything for some time. He lit the fire in the hearth and put the quails he had brought with him into the pot. He again put his arm round his wife's shoulders as the two watched the birds cooking.

"You are the mistress of this home. In a few days more another being will be playing about in your courtyard. Even if you don't care for me, you should try to be cheerful for the sake of the child. What wrong has the innocent little one done to you?"

Hamida thought of the slimy slug in the pea-pod. It was nauseating.

"Would you like some peas to go with the quails?" asked Rashida, seeing them heaped in front of Hamida.

"They are over-ripe; the season for peas is over. It will soon be *Baisakh*." She could n[illegible]r the

one corner they had dug over the earth and men were wrestling there. Even from that distance Hamida caught the smell of sweet, succulent *jalebis* and hot *pakoras* being fried in oil. She could see mounds of sweetmeats spread out in broad iron trays. Then the thought pierced through her heart like a steel shaft: her mother had borne a son after three daughters and this was his first *Baisakh*! She must have given her baby brother his first sip of water—touched his lips with a rose-petal dipped in the river. Their kinsmen must have come over to offer their good wishes...... ...Perhaps at that time her mother's thoughts would have strayed to her first-born, Pooro!

Hamida had no tears left in her eyes She simply held her head between her hands and remained where she was for a long time.

A party of young lads with flowers entwined round their ears came along the street below, they laughed with gay abandon One of the boys raised his voice and sang:

Beside the well sat a maiden fair,
Brushing her teeth as bright as pearls.
Fear not, maiden. He that loves you
Shall come and take you away.
He shall come and steal you away.
He shall come without your bidding.
He shall make you his own one day.

Why had not Ram Chand come for her? Did he not love her? It was Rashida who had come without her bidding; it was Rashida who had stolen her away and made her his wife. But did he love her?

The peasants danced the *bhangra* as they went along. They yelled and leapt in the air. Then one of them sang a few couplets on his own :

When your nose-ring gleamed in the sun
The ploughmen left their ploughing.
Your wet *lungi* sticks to your bottom
Because the rain it rains on your bottom.
Maiden fair, turn not your back to us.

Why were all the songs sung in praise of pretty girls ? Why did not someone compose songs of lament for girls in her predicament ? Why not hymns for those whom God has discarded ?

A party of girls came down the lane. They were young, but there was the impatience of youthful womanhood in their movements. They passed by the *bhangra* dancers. The boys took sidelong glances at the girls ; they giggled like the girls, then made bawdy jokes and roared with laughter. What if the boys were suddenly to pick up the girls and carry them away on their horses ? What if all the girls were abducted...? Thus passed the festival of the first of *Baisakh*.

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It was mid-summer. The earth burned like an oven full of dry faggots. Hamida was restless : she stood up, sat down, lay flat on her back. But nothing calmed her ; not even the bowls of water that she gulped down again and again. The women advised her to wash her hair and take a bath, because there was no knowing when the child might come. Then

she would not be able to leave her bed for several days.

With each bout of pain Hamida got paler, till her face as white as cotton. To Rashida she looked exactly as she had when he had grabbed her and thrown her across his saddle—as white as pumice-stone. That day her cries had come out of the anguish of her soul; today they rose out of the anguish of the flesh.

Rashida sent for Rahima's mother. By the time she arrived, Hamida's pains were following each other in quick succession. Rahima's mother sent for the midwife. The midwife came, spread an old mat on the ground and laid Hamida on it. After the soft bed, the hard floor hurt Hamida and she began to whimper.

Rashida stood guard on the threshold. He could hear Hamida's long, stifled moans through the closed door. He wished he could take some if not all of the pain from his wife's body into his. But there she was—all alone in her suffering.

The midwife fanned Hamida's face. Rahima's mother poured water into her mouth with a teaspoon. Rashida heard Hamida shriek thrice; then the crying of a newborn babe fell on his ears. He breathed a protracted sigh of relief; at long last the agony was over. He wanted to go inside to massage his wife's limbs and give her comfort. He wanted to make up to her. So far, he had brought her nothing but tears. But the midwife and Rahima's mother were still busy inside.

The minutes slowly ticked by and there was not a sound from within. Rashida's heart sank. Was

its head between one's nails, pluck it out of her flesh like a tick or a leech and cast it away....

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Four days after Hamida had been delivered of her son, her breast filled with milk. On the fifth day, the midwife (who had been feeding the babe with drops of milk squeezed from wads of cotton-wool) put the boy to his mother's breast. A strange, strong emotion welled up in Hamida's bosom. She wanted to put the child, against her cheek and cry to her heart's content. The boy was a toy made of her own blood, a statue carved out of her own flesh In all the teeming world; this boy was all that really belonged to her She did not care if she never again saw the faces of her mother, father, brothers or sisters... she would gaze at the face of her son in whose veins mingled the blood of her parents—the parents who had cast her aside.

The boy tugged at his-mother's breast. Hamida felt as if the boy was drawing the milk from her veins and was sucking it out with force, just as his father had used force to take her. All said and done, he was his father's son, his father's flesh and blood and shaped like him. He had been planted inside her by force, nourished inside her womb against her will—and was now sucking the milk from her breasts, whether she liked it or not.

The thought went round and round in her head with insidious insistence: This boy...this boy's father...all mankind...all men...men who gnaw a woman's body like a dog gnawing a bone and like a dog eat it up.

the pitcher. She wanted to be reassured that it was not really as late as she thought.

"The dawn hasn't come up yet," replied Hamida in a soothing voice. The girl was reassured ; she put her' pitcher on the ground. Hamida also stopped. Kammo's pale face lit up with a faint smile. Hamida had never before seen the girl smile. She always curled her lips up in a very curious way, as if sucking something.

"Kammo, do you come around this time every day?"

"I am rather late today ; I will get a thrashing," replied Kammo, grabbing the pitcher again. The smile drained from her face like the colour running off a cloth. The old melancholy look returned.

"Is the old woman related to you ?"

"She's my aunt." The pitcher began to slip down Kammo's arm.

"I can carry the pitcher for you," said Hamida, without extending her hand. Everyone knew that she was a Muslim.... Hamida the wife of Rashida. And Kammo was a Hindu girl.

"You will pollute my pitcher," replied Kammo unabashed.

"I will not touch the water. You can scrub the pitcher from the outside," said Hamida laughing. Kammo also sniggered, but she did not let go of her pitcher. The two continued walking.

They had barely gone a few steps when Kammo stumbled. Hamida caught the pitcher; but Kammo fell on to a heap of rubble and sprained her foot. Hamida put aside the pitcher and massaged Kammo's ankle with her palms. The pain subsided

and Kammo was able to walk again. Every time her foot hurt, she cried, "*Hai Ma* !" The girl heaped all her misfortunes on her dead mother.

Hamida had often heard Kammo's aunt grumble : "They had the wretch to torture us !" When her mother died, Kammo's father had taken another woman and moved to the city. Her father's mistress refused to have anything to do with Kammo. So Kammo was abandoned by her father as well. People often say that when a person's mother dies, even a real father becomes a stepfather. It was Hamida's ill luck that her real father had become a stepfather before becoming a widower, and her real mother had, without being a widow, become like a stepmother.

* * *

The eastern horizon turned grey. The outlines of the houses could be seen clearly. The two girls arrived at the corner of the street and, becoming apprehensive lest someone see them, Kammo took over her pitcher and limped homewards, while Hamida quickened her steps.

That afternoon, while Hamida was trying to pacify her child, her outer door was pushed open and Kammo burst in. Hamida put aside Javed and took Kammo in her arms. Kammo had almost forgotten how to cry, but the warmth of Hamida's embrace brought a flood of tears to her eyes. Hamida's maternal instincts were roused. She wished to mother the unwanted Kammo ; to spoil her, to let her be petulant and indulge in tantrums ; to take her in her lap and walk about with Kammo in her arms ;

to kiss her over and over again.

But Hamida was a Muslim and Kammo was a Hindu. And even though she still thought of herself as Pooro, she knew that Kammo would not eat anything in her home. Hamida very much wanted to break pieces of bread and feed Kammo with her own hands; to hold the bowl of milk for the girl while she drank.

Hamida again massaged Kammo's foot, rubbed it with *ghee* and pressed on it wads of warm cotton-wool.

Suddenly, Kammo became impatient. Her aunt's grim face looked like a hatchet before her mind's eye. She took up the sewing needle for which she professed to have come. Hamida also gave her a lump of *gur* and almonds.

Kammo seldom changed her clothes. She wore the same tattered shirt in summer and on the coldest days of winter. She never had anything on her feet. Hamida gave her a new pair of slippers. Kammo explained to her aunt, "I found them in the sugar-cane field."

Only in the dim light of the early mornings did Hamida dare to help Kammo with her pitcher of water. And Kammo had to make all kinds of excuses to visit Hamida: sometimes to grind chick-peas in the handmill; sometimes to pound spices in the mortar. Little Javed got to know Kammo. Whenever she failed to turn up, Hamida would chide her on behalf of her son. Hamida and Kammo behaved towards each other like mother and daughter, as well as like two close friends.

Hamida gave Kammo things to eat and clothes

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to wear. Kammo's frail body began to fill up ; her sallow, sunken cheeks became pink and rounded. Hamida helped her wash her hair and then oiled and plaited it.

One early morning Kammo came while it was still dark. She burst into tears as soon as she entered. She looked like a squeezed lemon. Hamida hugged the girl to her bosom and kissed her on the forehead, but Kammo could not control her sobs. Her *dupatta* and her hands were wet with tears.

"My aunt says that if I come to your house again she will suck the blood out of my body," sobbed Kammo. She put her head in Hamida's lap.

"Why ? What have I done ?" asked Hamida.

"Aunty says she has heard that you have run away from your home and I may do the same," explained Kammo, stifling her sobs.

The morning light was getting brighter. Hamida felt something snap inside her. That was the last she saw of Kammo.

* * *

Hamida had suffered much ; the suffering had aged her. She was not twenty years old, but these twenty years had taught her more than she could ever have learnt in an age. She had become as serious and as thoughtful as an old philosopher. Only she could not put her many thoughts into words. Her emotions rose like foam on the crest of a wave, were battered against the rocks of experience and subsided once more into the water.

Occasionally Hamida called on Rahima's two wives. She was not particularly interested in them

but was drawn towards a young, sallow-faced girl who lived next door. The girl had large, melancholy eyes which she lowered every time she saw Hamida. Hamida had a feeling that the girl wanted to get to know her and that they had much in common. She was not wrong. She learnt that the girl had been married two years earlier and had been ill since her wedding day. No one knew what it was that was eating into the girl; her skin had become the colour of a spring onion; her face, yellow like a stick of turmeric. Some people said that she was possessed by a spirit; others, that she had contracted some unknown disease.

Hamida and the girl began to exchange smiles when they passed each other in the village. Then Hamida sent some yarn to the girl's mother to have it woven into a bed-sheet. This gave her the opportunity to get to know the girl. Her name was Taro.

Taro was shortly due to return to her husband. She had been getting fainting fits; she had them every time she was due to go back to her house. Each time she returned to her parents, she was thinner than before. Her bones stuck out of her flesh. But no one did anything about her.

One day Taro happened to be by herself. Hamida sat down beside her and began to ply her with questions: "Taro, surely there is someone who can diagnose your trouble!"

"No, not a soul."

"Has someone felt your pulse?"

"I have had my fill of preserves wrapped in silver paper and bottles of *arrack*."

"Taro, you must tell me: why do you allow this

se to destroy your life ?"
it will only enlighten the weight of the world."
You don't have so much to weigh down the world
h; your going will not make much difference.
ave you ever thought of the feelings of your mother,
ho took the trouble to bring you up ?"
"I could not care less," replied Taro brusquely.
'She will shed a few tears and then forget about
me." After a while she burst out : "When parents
give away a daughter in marriage, they put a noose
round her neck and hand the other end of the rope
to the man of their choice."
"Maybe it's the water of your husband's village
that is upsetting your stomach," suggested Hamida.
"A woman has to get used to every kind of water,"
said Taro with some passion.
"Taro, I am your friend. Why don't you tell me ?"
"What can I tell you ? When a girl is given awa
in marriage, God deprives her of her tongue, so tha
she may not complain."
"You are absolutely right," agreed Hamida.
"My parents have no use for me; parents ne
have for a married daughter. And my husband
no use for me, because another woman is mist
of both heart and his house."
"Taro, do you mean to tell me that your hus
was already married ?" asked Hamida, surp
"Why did your parents give you to him ?"
"They did not know. Besides, at that ti
was only keeping her."
"Surely, his parents must have known."
"They certainly knew. She was a low-caste
His parents wished to get a daughter-in-law

own caste."

"Did they have no thought for the girl they proposed to get as their daughter-in-law ?"

"Sister, who bothers about other people's sorrows! Besides, they say : 'We feed and cloth the girl. We give her money to spend. What has she to grumble about ?' "

"As if food and clothing were all a woman wanted !" put in Hamida.

"For full two years I have had to sell my body for a mess of pottage and a few rags. I am like a whore... like a common prostitute...." Taro clenched her fists; her eyes turned up in their sockets showing only the whites; her body stiffened like a plank of wood.

There was no one in the house. Hamida began to press the girl's limbs and massage the soles of her feet. Taro came to in a little while, but continued to mumble: "Don't touch me! I am unclean! Don't you see, I am a slut, a whore, a common tart...." The girl was babbling away foolishly when her mother entered.

"What am I to do ?" wailed the mother, when she heard Taro. "As if fate had not enough shafts for me, this girl adds her barbed words to kill me! She and her brother will prove the death of us. He's picked up strange ideas at his college in Lahore and has stuffed the girl's brain with a lot of nonsense."

"Amma, you can't deny it's been very hard for her," protested Hamida.

"Once we give away a daughter our lips are sealed. It's up to her husband to treat her as he likes. It is a man's privilege," explained the mother.

my lips are sealed and my le[illegible]
exploded Taro. "There is no justice in the [illegible]
nor any God. *He* can do what he likes; there
God to stop him. God's fetters were meant
or my feet."

ro had a second fit. Her fists became clenched
her legs stiffened. Her mother splashed water
o her face and poured a few drops into her mouth.

* * *

amida was taken aback. This was the first time
he had come across a girl who had such views and
who could speak her mind so boldly. She had often
wanted to say things like that herself, but had never
dared. Taro continued to mumble: "This is a big
fraud. I have been swindled... I was never married
.... You are lying: the whole lot of you are liars...
Why do you hold me? Let me alone. Get away
from me.... She punctuated her words by kicking
her heels in the ground.

"Taro, pull yourself together. Don't blurt out
everything that comes into your mind. What will
people say if they overhear you?" chided the moth-
er, her eyes brimming with tears.

Taro would come to and then collapse like a defla[ted]
ed sack.

"Don't say such stupid things when you return [to]
your husband's home," continued her mother. [It]
does not matter how he behaves. Allah is al[ways]
there to see whatever goes on. Allah was witne[ss to]
your marriage."

"Mother, if Allah was a witness to my wed[ding]
then Allah perjured himself. I was never [...]

never...." Taro gaped vacant-eyed at the beams in the roof.

Hamida wondered how Taro, who could dare to say such things, was yet unable to break out of the perfidious institution of marriage.

It was late in the afternoon. Hamida rose with a sigh. She had seen other people's sorrows. They made her own troubles appear very small. She had heard of houses that were not homes. Taro's story made her own home appear like a haven of refuge.

Hamida wanted to forget that Rashida had abducted and wronged her. She fervently longed to make love to him. After all, he was her husband and the father of her son. This alone was true; this alone mattered. The rest was mere prattle and a lie.

Hamida settled down in Sakkar as if she had always belonged to the village. She showed no desire to go anywhere else. ("I did not come here of my own will, nor will I leave of my own will," she used to say.) Her son Javed was almost two. He could run about on his own. He was the apple of his father's eye. Rashida loved his son's childish prattle and the endearing way he clung to his legs and called him "Abba!" The two played hide-and-seek in the evenings and had lots of fun. The boy was full of mischief. He would put his hands in the wet clay with which his mother plastered her oven; he would mix turmeric and chillis in her buttermilk. The home was full of the child's contagious laughter.

One day a woman came to their door selling toys. Javed dragged his mother to the toy-seller. Hamida gave the woman a handful of grain and some old garments in exchange for a straw rattle. She was

still talking to her when she heard a lot of commotion. Suddenly a woman came running down the street, screaming like one possessed by the devil. People picked up their children and bolted the doors of their houses.

The woman wore only a *Salwar*, which covered her from waist to ankles; her belly and breasts were bare. The sun had scorched her skin to the semblance of black parchment. Her hair was tangled and hung like ropes about her shoulders. Her body was caked with dirt and appeared as if she had never washed since the day she was born. She waved her hands in the air and spread out her legs in an ungainly way. She could not walk; she could only run like an animal. Her laughter was fiendish. When she opened her mouth she bared a row of uneven teeth. Her thin, charred body gave no clue to her age. She was more like a skeleton than a living person.

Before anything could be done to prevent her, the madwoman snatched a handful of clay toys from the toy-seller's basket and ran away. The poor toy-seller looked askance at her depleted basket. The madwoman's hysterical laughter and ghoulish shrieks were heard in Sakkar for a long time. She had come to stay there.

She wandered about the lanes. She ate whatever she could find in the fields. Sometimes a village woman would give her a couple of *chapatis* which she would devour ravenously. Many gave her their old shirts to cover her naked bosom. She would pluck off the buttons and tear up the shirt. It would hang round her neck in tatters till she tore these up as well and was bare-bosomed again. At times, she

even discarded her *salwar* and walked about without a stitch of clothing. Then some woman would cover her waist with an old *salwar* and another would drape her breasts with a discarded shirt. And the process would start all over again.

The madwoman became a part of the village. Whenever the urchins teased her, some elder would rebuke them roundly. The woman became a source of terror to the small children. If they were naughty, all their mothers had to say was: "If you don't behave, the madwoman will carry you off." And they would become like little angels.

* * *

The woman found an empty shed in the outskirts of the village. Some kind soul spread a tattered mat on the floor. People began to leave food and water for her. The shed became her home and she got into the habit of spending her nights in it.

The woman did no harm to anyone; she never stole anything. She only took what others discarded and filled her belly with the scraps they gave her. All she did was to run about and laugh with mad abandon.

The woman's thin frame began to fill up. Her waist began to spread out. The village women tried to cover up her nakedness and persuade her to stay indoors; but nothing would penetrate her mind. She continued the way she was, laughing hysterically and running about.

One evening the elders of the *Panchayat* took the madwoman by the hand and left her in the dark at some distance from Sakkar. "Out of sight, out of

nind !" They assured one another. "Let some other village take care of her now." Next day before noon she was back in Sakkar, roaming about the lanes just as before. Her mad laughter could be heard in the fields.

"What sort of man could have done this to her ?" the women of Sakkar asked each other. They clenched their teeth in anger.... "He must be savage beast to put a madwoman in this condition."

"She is neither young nor attractive ; she is just a lump of flesh without a mind to go with it...a living skeleton...a lunatic skeleton...a skeleton picked to its bones by kites and vultures," thought Hamida.

The madwoman's belly grew bigger day by day.

* * *

In the early hours of the morning, while it was stil dark, Hamida went out of her home, as was her habit She took the footpath that led to the fields. She ha barely gone a few yards when she noticed the ou lines of a human form beside the trunk of a tre She picked up courage and tiptoed towards t recumbent figure. It was the madwoman. She w as dead as a block of stone, and between her legs v a new-born baby, still attached to its mother by umbilical cord.

An agonised groan escaped Hamida's throat. shut her eyes and swayed as if she was going to Cold shivers ran up and down her spine. She r tered up courage and ran back home to fetch husband.

Rashida came and felt the madwoman's pulse was not necessary, for death was clearly stamp

... death had not claimed her child, whose
... ie-force.
... ered the
body with an old sheet she had brought with her.

"In the name of Allah !" muttered Rashida as he severed the cord. Hamida wrapped the baby in her *dupatta*.

The news spread in the village like the morning mist. Women dropped the plates in which they were kneading flour; they left the fires burning in their hearths and hurried to Hamida's house. Hamida had bathed and dressed the baby. It lay in a cot as soft and fair as a wad of cottonwool. It sucked the end of the cloth which Hamida had soaked in warm milk. Javed watched over his little guest with a sense of ownership.

"May Allah bless you !"
"May Allah fill your home with plenty !"
"May your children live long years !"
"You have earned merit in the eyes of Allah !"

The women came and blessed Hamida. They lauded her act of mercy and went back to their homes. The elders buried the madwoman's corpse.

In the evening Rashida cleansed the glass of the hurricane lantern and lit the wick. The baby blinked its big eyes; it was fascinated by the flame. Hamida peered at the little babe. What wretch could have lusted after the charred body of the madwoman—she asked herself. Did she consent to the act or was she raped? Did the man realise what he was perpetrating on a lunatic woman? Did he know

what would happen to the seed he had planted in the vagrant's womb? The poor woman was not even aware of the fact that she was going to give birth to a boy. How did she suffer the pains of labour? Did no midwife feel compassion for her? Her shrieks must have been lost in the loneliness of the dark night; she must have wrestled with the gusts of wind and writhed in agony on the cold, hard ground! But nature's laws are immutable. The child ignored its mother's agony and came out into the world. And its mother perished in the final process of giving it birth.

Hamida dozed off to sleep beside the cot. She dreamt of Rashida galloping away with her lying across his saddle; she dreamt of his keeping her in a gardener's hut for three nights and days and then throwing her out; she dreamt of her turning insane and running about the village lanes with a life quickening in her womb...and then giving birth to a child under the shade of a tree. The child was exactly like Javed. It tugged at her breasts and tried to suck with its toothless gums. It howled because there was no milk.

Hamida woke up with a start. Her new baby was yelling with all its might. She picked it up and put it against her bosom. She looked a little apprehensively at Javed, who had just fallen asleep. She glanced towards Rashida, who was sitting beside the hearth in the courtyard. He had not left her, nor thrown her out. She was safely installed in his house. He was a kind husband. He had given her the handsome, curly-headed Javed. And now her family had increased. God had himself sent her

another son. Hamida got up kissed her new son on the forehead.

Javed had her breast for two full years and had not been very long weaned. Hamida had heard that white cummin-seed brought milk to a woman's breasts. She swallowed a palmful with a tumbler of milk. Three days later Hamida's breasts filled with milk. She offered them to the child of the madwoman of Sakkar as if he were her own son.

* * *

As a tiny spark glimmering in a cake of cow-dung spreads its fire to the others heaped over it, gossip about the foundling began to be slowly whispered around the village. "The madwoman was a Hindu. The Muslims have grabbed a Hindu child. Under the very noses of the Hindus, they have converted a Hindu child into a Mussulman...."

As a cat takes its kittens from one place to another, Hamida clasped the foundling to her bosom and took him from the front courtyard to the rooms at the back of the house. Even within the seclusion of her walls, she got to know what was being said about the child and its dead mother.

The Hindus called a meeting to discuss the matter. "Are we sure that the madwoman was a Hindu?" asked one. "I have heard it with my own ears. She was the daughter of a rich merchant of Lala-Musa. Her husband's second wife mixed some sort of poison in her food which made her lose her mind," replied another.

"I am told that her people put her in chains and did their best to keep her at home; but it was in

kismet to be a tramp," explained one.

"With my own eyes I saw the sacred '*Om*' tattoo *On* her left arm," said a man, slapping the ound to invest his words with an air of finality.

"Friends, what perfidy is this ! We have our eyes ride open and they throw dust into them."

"Shame on us all ! We have let them convert a Hindu boy into a Mussalman, as if it were the most natural thing in the world."

Some were for forgetting the whole business : "Friends, let it be. We do not know what evil spirit sired the child. Who wants to saddle himself with the son of a bitch ?"

"Idiot !" retorted a hothead at the top of his voice. "The issue is between our faith and theirs. If we let this matter go unchallenged today, tomorrow they will want all of us to become Muslims. Don't you see how uppish their behaviour has become ?"

The atmosphere in the room was suffocating wit ıate. "We will take back the boy ; we'll see wh will dare to stay our hand."

"It won't be much trouble bringing him up. can raise a subscription and pay the water-carri woman to look after him."

"Surely we can't be such a useless lot as not t able to afford the upbringing of one little boy !"

"There is no knowing that the boy will not out to be a deaf-mute or a lunatic like his mo or he may take after...."

"Why should that matter ? When he gro he can sweep the temple floor. All he'll wan square meals a day. Surely we can provide t

They applauded each other's courage. Th

back-slapping and braggadocio.

"The water-carrier's wife may have her own views on the subject. We had better find out from her before we do anything."

"She wouldn't dare to refuse us. We'll cross her palm with silver and then broach the subject."

"We are counting our chickens before they are hatched.... Let the boy grow up a little...or will they be circumcising him?"

"Are you wanting to back out now? If you cannot do even this little bit for your faith, then go and drown yourselves in the sea."

"If someone as much as diverts water from your fields to his own before his time, you think nothing of splitting open his skull. But when it comes to being robbed of your sons, your mouths are covered with mildew."

Once again the atmosphere was charged with hate, as thick as the smoke of a coal-fire.

Thereafter, the Hindus began to give Rashida black looks whenever they passed him in the village. Rashida pretended to ignore them, but he warned his wife and mildly suggested that it was not worth their while to make an issue of the subject. Every time Rashida brought up the matter, Hamida's heart would sink. She had nurtured the tiny bundle of skin and bone with her own breasts for six months, till he too had started to look as fat and chubby as her own Javed. He had come to look upon Hamida as his mother; his eyes followed her as she moved about the house. He stretched his arms out for Rashida as any child would toward its father. Why had not the Hindus thought of taking the baby on

st day? Why had they let her spend s... ns of sleepless nights? Why had they let her ow palmful of cummin-seed and turn the blood er veins to milk in her breasts? Why had they ie her wash the child's soiled garments till her ids had become hard and calloused? Why? ny? Why?

One day the Hindu elders of the village sent for ashida.

The saliva dried up in Hamida's mouth. Would they be nasty to Rashida? Would they insult him? She had brought it on her husband's head. She pleaded with Rashida to take her with him. She would give them all the answers. She would plead with them for the boy. But Rashida would not have any of this and went alone to the house where they had summoned him.

A group of Hindu elders lay sprawling on *charpoys* laid out in a courtyard; they were expecting Rashida and his Muslim friends. Rashida came alone and in a matter-of-fact tone enquired after their health. A uneasy silence followed.

"Well, what do you intend doing? Are you are you not going to return the boy to us?" ask one very gravely as he passed the pipe of the hoo to his neighbour.

"What right have I to give away or keep a That only Allah, whose gift it is, can decide," re Rashida, touching his forehead and looking up sky.

"This is honeyed talk; get down to rea snapped one angrily.

"Allah out of his infinite mercy picked c

save the life of the child ; if it had been a couple of hours later, the boy might have been devoured by a tom-cat or a pie-dog. Allah had decreed a longer life for him..."

"True ! If God decrees a longer span of life, no earthly power can cut it short. But you are no doubt aware that his mother was a Hindu woman. We cannot tolerate the taking away of a Hindu child."

"Good friends, I did not know who she was, Hindu or what. She ate the food from Hindu homes as well as from Muslim. .."

"She was insane. You are not out of your mind, are you ?" snapped one.

"If you had taken over the child on the very first day and brought him up, I would not have said a word. When we picked him up he was a handful of bones. My wife has nourished him with infinite care for six months and saved his life. And now you are suddenly concerned about his future. Friends, beware of the wrath of Allah ! It is for him to decree who will bring up the child, you or I. What do you think I will get out of it ?" There was a tone of sincerity in Rashida's voice. Some of the Hindus were for leaving Rashida with the halter he had put round his own neck.

"We don't want this business to get out of hand," spoke up one of the Hindus, a little gently. "The child is not related either to you or any of us. This is however a matter of religion and one should not stand in its way. Why put your life in jeopardy ? If somebody takes it into his head to do you harm, don't say we did not warn you ! You should realise what is best for you and give us the child of your

own free will. If you want to be reimbursed for the expense you have incurred, we will pay you."

"Indeed...most certainly," chorused the others.

"Allah, have mercy on me!" exclaimed Rashida, holding both his ears with his hands.

"We have the water-carrier's woman here. Some of us will accompany you to your house and bring away the child. We will purify him and re-convert him to Hinduism."

"For the last time, I beg of you," pleaded Rashida, with the palms of his hands joined as if in prayer, "have compassion for the child and let him stay where he is. My wife is looking after him as if she had borne him in her womb."

"We have been straight with you and pointed out the right course for you to take. If you know your interests, then act like a wise man and come along with us—or take the consequences. We too know that *ghee* only sticks to the crooked finger."

The Hindu elders stood up to indicate that the argument was at an end. The water-carrier's woman emerged, her head covered with her *dupatta*. There was no way out. Rashida got up and took the party to his house.

Hamida stood on the threshold, with her eyes fixed on the lane. She saw Rashida's dejected look and the people with him. Her heart sank. It reminded her of the day when she had been snatched away from her mother, separated from her father and estranged from her own brothers and sisters. The foundling had become a part of her own flesh and blood. Hamida ran indoors, picked up the child and clasped him to her bosom.

Rashida entered his courtyard like one who had lost his way. He did not have to say a word, nor did Hamida ask him for an explanation. The water-carrier's woman hesitated to take the child from Hamida's clasp.

"Hurry up ! It's getting late," ordered one of the Hindus in a harsh tone. "We have other things to do."

The water-carrier's wife took the foundling from Hamida's arms. The boy's hands clutched Hamida's *dupatta* and pulled it off her head. The water-carrier's wife forced open the child's hand to release the *dupatta*. The child felt the rough touch of unfamiliar hands and began to cry.

Hamida sank to the ground. She heard the boy's crying recede further and further down the lane. Milk continued to ooze from her breasts and wet her shirt.

That night no food was cooked in Rashida's home. Javed asked his father, "Abba, where have they taken my little brother ? Abba, when will my brother come home ?" Rashida looked at his son and hung his head.

Hamida thought of Kammo and then of the foundling. Why did she have to pick up flowers which others had plucked and cast aside ? What inner compulsion made her water withered buds and try to revive them ? And yet they remained estranged from her and left in her solitude ! The only one who stayed by her was Rashida. He was her man, the father of her son.

The next day passed. And the day following. On the fourth day, the villagers could talk of nothing but the fate of the foundling. Everyone was saying :

"The boy is on the brink of death; he throws up every drop of milk that goes down his throat."

*   *   *

Hamida beat her head against the wall and shed bitter tears. Her breasts were bursting with milk and the boy had been weaned away from her. What an abyss yawned between her aching breasts and the child's hungry lips!

"The boy was weaned too suddenly; he was bound to sicken."

"If the child dies, our village will surely fall under a curse."

"I have been begging of my husband to put sense into the heads of the others and take the infant back from where they brought him."

"We have children of our own. A child's curse can be terrible."

"My husband is exceedingly pig-headed! I told him from the very beginning that those who try to take things out of other people's hearths only burn their fingers."

"I hear that last night the water-carrier's woman gave the boy cold milk to drink. He hasn't been the same ever since."

"How could a child as frail as that cope with buffalo milk? Naturally he got sick at once."

"No, no, no,—it's sorrow that's killing the child. From the day he was born he's seen no other woman than that Hamida. How can you expect him to get used to another person!"

"Poor child! He hasn't got a tongue to say what he wants."

The foundling was the only topic of conversation among the Hindu women.

The fourth day passed. And the fifth. The next morning three men burst into Rashida's courtyard.

"Take him ! We leave his life in your custody ! If you can save him, he is yours !" They deposited a yellow, waxen doll wrapped in white linen in Rashida's lap. The child was in a state of coma.

Anger surged up in Rashida's face. He had a strong desire to thrash the men ; he wanted to shout: "Weren't you the fellows who offered me those silver coins to compensate me for my six months of service ? Now that the child has one foot in the grave you want to give him back to me ! Take him wherever you wish to and go to Hell out of here !" But he saw the sad expression on Hamida's face and decided to swallow his pride.

A week later the villagers saw the foundling gurgling and playing merrily in Hamida's courtyard.

Rahima's aged mother was gradually losing the sight of both her eyes. One of her two daughters-in-law had died giving birth to a girl ; the other was not on very good terms with her The old woman was quite vigorous for her age. She looked after the kitchen ; she could spin and weave and had filled the house with bed-sheets of different sizes ; she could sort out grain, grind flour in the hand-mill, fluff up cotton for spinning, churn the milk. She managed to do all this even with her failing eyesight. Nevertheless, her daughter-in-law taunted her and said that once the hag lost the sight of her eyes no one would as much as give her water in a bowl of clay.

One day Rahima's mother came to Hamida and begged her to take a fortnight off and accompany her to another village, where a man was reported to be able to cure weak eyesight.

"Amma, where does the Clever One reside?" asked Hamida.

"Daughter, he's not very clever. The Holy Ones have blessed him with powers of healing. And he owns a spring. I am told that if one washes one's eyes with the spring water after the morning prayer, it cures eye ailments in a few days. They say that many people who had lost their sight have come back with vision. He also makes mud packs of the clay from the bottom of the spring."

"Where does he live, Amma?" asked Hamida again.

"At Rattoval. The Holy One has had some tents put up near the spring for the comfort of people who come from distant places."

The name Rattoval pierced through Hamida's ears like a needle. From the fields of Chatto she had longingly gazed at the footpath which led to Rattoval. That was the way Ram Chand would have taken. He was to have come on a gaily-caparisoned horse, as bridegrooms do; that was the way her bridal palanquin carried by four bearers would have taken.

A mist rose before Hamida's eyes; her mind was full of unfulfilled desires. Could not she see him just once, to know what he looked like? Could not she visit his village just once?

"Amma, I will go with you." The words escaped Hamida's lips.

"May Allah give your husband and children long

lives ! May your breasts fill to feed many sons !" The blessings poured forth from the old woman.

"Amma, you will have to get round Javed's father. I am not going to say a word to him."

"He is like my own son ; he will not dare to disobey me."

For Hamida the night was full of argument with herself. "What is Ram Chand to me ? I will not as much as raise my eyes if he passes by ! What have I to do with his village ? He is welcome to live in it as long as he likes. Amma will have her eyes treated and then we will come back. Silly woman, why must you yearn to see him ? He must have put you out of his mind like a bad dream...."

Rashida did not object to his wife's going to Rattoval. Javed stayed with his father. Hamida took the younger boy with her. An old servant of Rahima's was sent with the women.

The servant and the child took their seat in front alongside the *ekka* driver. The two women were in the rear with their luggage. The movement of the *ekka* rocked the baby to sleep.

In a little while Hamida also dozed off. She dreamed that she was reclining on an embroidered cushion inside a silver palanquin. Her arms were weighed down with bangles ; her palms were dyed red with henna. The palanquin lurched sideways and her *dupatta* slid off her head. When she adjusted it, the tassel-bells on her arms jingled.

Rahima's mother shook Hamida by the shoulder. "It's long after noon-time. You must have something to eat."

Hamida woke up with a start. The palanquin,

the bangles, the tassel-bells and the henna-marks vanished. She found herself on the rear seat of the *ekka*, alongside Rahima's mother. The driver had pulled up his *ekka* at a wayside village to rest his horse and let his passengers refresh themselves. Rahima's mother opened a bundle and handed out fried *chapatis* to the servant and the *ekka* driver and shared the others with Hamida.

"Let's get over the eating as quick as we can," said the *ekka* driver. "I must give my horse rest for the night, as I have to return early in the morning." They finished their meal and clambered on to the *ekka*. Hamida put her head against the side and within a few moments was back in her gently-swaying bridal palanquin on the unending road to Rattoval. The sound of pipes and drums came to her ears and all at once the palanquin was surrounded by bands of pipers and drummers....That must be Rattoval. where they were welcoming the new bride... The girls were singing....A woman lifted up her bridal veil.... Then somebody placed a crying child in her lap.... The more the child cried, the more the women laughed ; it would bring good luck to the groom....

Rahima's mother was shaking her by the shoulder. "How sleepy you are today ! The boy has been crying for a long time."

"We passed a big procession, with one band of musicians after another. You slept through the racket," said the servant.

The *ekka* was close to Rattoval. They alighted near the spring where the Holy One had made his centre. In place of tents, he had raised a few mud

huts for the pilgrims.

The servant arranged the baggage in the hut assigned to them and accompanied Rahima's mother to see the Holy One. Hamida spread a sheet on a *charpoy* and put the boy to sleep. She stood on the threshold of the hut and gazed across the fields. At long last she had come to Rattoval.... Nobody had sent for her. No one had come to receive her. No one played a pipe or sang a song to welcome her. No one slipped a bangle on to her arm; she heard no rattle of cowrie-shells hanging in tassels from her bangles; not a leaf of henna had been crushed to paint her palms.

The Holy One told Rahima's mother that her treatment would take thirteen days. The servant returned to Sakkar next day. The two women were left with the child to look after themselves.

* * *

The days went by without Hamida once entering the village. She neither had any excuse nor the daring. And yet she wanted to see what Ram Chand's house looked like; to see him without being recognised by him or anyone else. She got more and more restless as the days went by. An old, long-forgotten song came back to her:

We go as we came.
Nobody welcomed our coming;
Nobody waves us farewell.
O Lord, let him know we came!

Many times the tears welled up in her eyes; many

times she stifled her sobs. She left the boy in the care of Rahima's mother and wandered about the fields.

"Would I be able to recognise him if I met him ?" she asked herself. "I hardly knew what he looked like, and that was many years ago !"

She often asked the peasants working in the fields: "Brother, whose land is this ? I want a few carrots. We are strangers here." The peasants named different people. No one ever named Ram Chand.

One day, when a peasant really named Ram Chand, Hamida could not believe her ears. Her head began to whirl. She sat down under an acacia tree. The strength drained from her legs and her feet became as cold as ice. A few moments later, the same peasant said : "Here comes the master." He gathered the chick-peas he had cut and went away towards the well.

Hamida could not hold back her tears ; she did not go behind the acacia tree or wipe them away with her *dupatta*. She could hardly see his face through the stream that poured from her eyes.

"*Bibi*, what is the matter with you ?" enquired Ram Chand, stopping in front of her.

Hamida could not say a word.

"What ails you, *Bibi* ?" Hamida heard him ask again. Her tongue adhered to her palate. The tears came in torrents, but not a word issued from her lips.

Ram Chand looked worried and glanced around for help. Before he could do anything, Hamida walked away through the fields like someone in a trance.

That was their last evening in Rattoval. The servant had come back from Sakkar to fetch them. They were to leave next morning.

Hamida could not sleep that night. "I did not say even a word to him.... What could I have told him when he asked me who I was?" A hundred thousand answers came to her mind and the evening scene was recalled over and over again.

The dawn had not yet greyed the eastern horizon. Hamida rose from her *charpoy* and, like one taken by the hand, seemed to follow a predestined path to the fields. Even in the dark she found the acacia tree under which the evening before she had encountered Ram Chand. Hamida picked up a handful of dust from the spot on which he had stood and reverently smeared it on her eyelids....

Her palms were still on her eyes when somebody took her hands in his. Hamida opened her eyes. It was Ram Chand.

"You are Pooro," he said. "All through the night that name has been going round and round in my head. You are Pooro, aren't you?" he asked to make sure.

Hamida's tongue again refused to utter a sound. She withdrew her hands from his and turned back towards her hut.

"If you are Pooro, tell me just once," pleaded Ram Chand, following her. "I've spent the whole night in the fields; something told me that you would come again. My heart tells me that you are Pooro."

"Pooro has been dead a long time," she replied.

She went away without turning to look back.

* * *

The days went by and added up to months; the months to years.

Whenever Hamida put the earthen vessel of milk on the hearth and heaped dried cow-dung under it, she thought of the tiny spark in the cow-dung slab which never went out. There was a spark somewhere deep down within her which also refused to go out; on the contrary, it too seemed to set others about it on fire. What was it that weighed her down like a ton of bricks placed on her chest? What constricted her throat? For some days she swallowed *ajwain* seeds with stale water. She tried drinking bowls of milk diluted with fresh iced water. But this did not lessen the heat in her body. She wondered if all was well with her mother—what else could be making her inside churn?

One evening Rashida came home with his face drawn; he looked haggard, like one risen from a sick-bed. He pretended to be very casual in his talk with Hamida and Javed. He fondled the little one, as he always did. When he was eating, Hamida noticed that he was finding it hard to swallow his *chapatis* and was washing them down with water.

When they lay beside each other on their respective *charpoys*, Rashida felt the questioning insistence of Hamida's mind. He spoke without her prompting: "One of our tenants came from my village today."

"From Chatto?"

"Yes."

"Did he bring any news?"

"He said that our crop had been harvested and the wheat had been stacked...."

"And then what happened ?"

"Someone set fire to the stacks at night. The entire harvest was destroyed and not a grain remains. He says the flames shot up and turned the grey sky a bright red."

"Was it deliberate ?"

"That's what they suspect."

"Who could want to do such a thing ?"

Rashida did not answer. Hamida also fell silent. The children were fast asleep, but no sleep came to the parents.

"What good would it do to anyone to burn another's property ?" asked Hamida after much hesitation. Rashida still remained silent. He turned restlessly from one side to another, he got up many times to drink water. "Put the boy on another *charpoy* ; I can't get any sleep with him lying alongside me," he said at last

Hamida put Javed on another *charpoy*. Rashida continued to toss as restlessly as before. He spoke again : "I have heard a wild rumour ; I have not been able to find out whether it is true or false."

"Tell me."

Rashida was in no hurry to tell her. Hamida lost her patience. She got up and sat beside her husband.

"I am told that a young stranger came to the village. He kept himself aloof Some villagers suspect that...that he was your brother "

"My brother ?"

"All this is, of course, from the ma come

over from Chatto today."

The only other information Rashida gave her was that the lad had asked a peasant about his ancestral home. The villagers suspected that he was the *Sahukar's* son; they had nothing more to go on than their suspicion.

Once more the husband and wife fell silent. Hamida felt a little dizzy. She had not seen her brother for eleven years. He was a young man. She wondered what he looked like. Would she be able to recognise him if he suddenly turned up? The thought [of his abducted sister must have brought him back. She forgot about the conflagration. Out of the ashes of the burnt stacks of wheat she culled a warmth for her brother. Did he set the stacks on fire? Did he want to settle his score with Rashida's family and avenge the insult to his sister? He was young; impetuous blood coursed in his veins.

Hamida realised that she belonged to the people whose year's harvest had been reduced to ashes. How could she identify herself with one who was the perpetrator of the crime! Or may be it was done by someone else and her poor brother was the innocent victim of suspicion! Her brother in the clutches of the police! Hamida lay on her *charpoy* staring at the dark sky. In her mind arguments followed each other like the buckets of a Persian wheel. When she finally fell asleep, she dreamed that the whole world was ablaze; everything from the grass on the ground to the tallest *peepul* was aflame. She saw a handsome youth sitting calmly by the fire warming his hands. When she awoke she

realised that the trouble that she had treated as indigestion and for which she had been taking *ajwain* and milk was not a physical ailment.



Just as a peeled orange falls apart into many segments, the Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs of the Punjab broke away from each other. As clouds of dust float over the roads, rumours of "incidents" began to float over the countryside. It was said that men were being slaughtered in hundreds; rows of houses were being burnt down; neighbours were slitting each other's throats. No one's life or property was safe.

With her own eyes, Hamida saw men collecting steel weapons and having their edges sharpened. She heard of families laying in stores of hatchets and axes. "We will be free; we will have our own government," everyone was saying. "We will not let a trace of Hindu blood remain in our country," they said openly in the market places.

"Can such things be true?" Hamida asked herself. "Where will all these millions of people go to?" She gave herself reassuring answers. "It is mass hysteria. It's a storm that will blow over in a day or two."

But people continued to talk evil; nothing they said made sense to Hamida. She heard wild stories of what was happening in the cities. The streets ran with blood and were said to be cluttered with human corpses, with no one to bury or cremate them; the stink from putrefying flesh hung in the air spreading pestilence. In some cities, barricades were put up to divide the Muslim zones from the Hindu. News

came of battered convoys of Muslims coming across the frontier. Many had died in India; many had fallen by the wayside; and many others had succumbed to their wounds after their journey was over.

Hamida's ears burned with rage when she heard of the abduction of Hindu girls by Muslims and of Muslim girls by Hindus. Some had been forced into marriage, some murdered, some stripped and paraded naked in the streets.

Thus passed August 15 of the year 1947.

* * *

In Hamida's village they beat drums of joy and hung out green flags with the crescent moon and star. Every day, with the Muslims foregathered at the mosque, the faces of the Hindus turned pale, as if they had been smeared with turmeric.

The Hindus in the village next to theirs began to flee. They left their cows tethered; their buffaloes lowed piteously. Their homes and fields became the haunt of ghosts. They fled during the night, but some were discovered and killed before they could get very far; others were found murdered many miles away.

Then it began in her own village, Chatto. The Hindus moved into one home for safety. The hoarded grain and provisions in the courtyard and no man or woman stirred out. They were like animals in a cage. Only the Muslims roamed about free. They broke into the homes of the Hindus and occupied them.

One morning they decided to assault the house in which the Hindus had sought refuge. They poured

kerosene oil over the windows and doors and put burning faggots to them. The flames shot up in the sky. The trapped men and women began to scream. Just then an Indian armed military convoy drove into the village. The soldiers came in the nick of time, put out the fire and rescued the inmates. They loaded *the petrified, screaming crowd into their trucks.* Three had been badly burnt; fat oozed from them like wax; the flesh peeled off their bones like parchment; their elbows and knees stuck out like white stumps. By the time the others were seated; these three were dead. There was no time to cremate them. The soldiers ignored the protests of their relatives, dumped their bodies in the lane and drove away.

The village looked deserted. The only non-Muslims left in it were the three charred corpses in the street. In two days, the crows and pie-dogs had torn away the flesh. Only the skeletons remained in front of the burnt-down house.

That was not all. One day Hamida saw a band of a dozen or more *goondas* pushing a young girl before them. She had not a stitch of clothing on her person. The *goondas* beat drums and danced about the naked girl. Hamida could not find out where they came from or where they were going.

It was a sin to be alive in a world so full of evil, thought Hamida. It was a crime to be born a girl.

That evening Hamida discovered a young girl hiding in their sugar-cane field.

After dark, Hamida brought the girl home. She was from a refugee encampment in the neighbour in village and like the others, was awaiting her turn to be evacuated to India. The camp was guarded

to buy food and grain. Some people from Chatto went out to settle rates and then, under the very eyes of the constables, sold their maize and barley for their weight in gold and silver.

Hamida did not need any excuse to go to the encampment. She spotted Ram Chand in the midst of the crowd. "You need food or provisions ?" she asked him casually.

"Yes," replied Ram Chand. He showed no sign of recognition.

"Have the cash ready. I will bring the things over at night" She shot a quick glance at the constables, then turned away.

Hamida told her husband that she meant to get the girl hiding in their house into the refugee convoy. She gave her a pot full of flour to carry on her head, took a can of *ghee* herself and went back to the encampment.

The refugees had tramped all through the day and lay sprawled on the ground. Although the cloud of death hovered over them like the malevolent spirit of a vampire bat, they slept as if they had not a care in the world.

The two women slipped past the sentries on their beat and Hamida dumped the can of *ghee* on the ground in front of Ram Chand.

"You are Pooro, aren't you ?" asked Ram Chand

"Do you still wish to know ?" Hamida replied. Her tone was changed with recrimination; it was the first and last complaint she could make to him. Ram Chand lowered his head in shame.

"Have you any news of my mother and father ?" she asked anxiously.

"They did not return after the wedding. They..."

"Wedding? Whose wedding?" interrupted Hamida.

"After you disappeared, they gave your younger sister in marriage to me. Your brother was at the same time married to my sister. Your parents left for Thailand and never came back."

"My sister....she must be here with you!" This was the first she had heard of her sister's marriage to Ram Chand.

"No, your brother came over a few days ago to leave his wife with my parents. He took your sister back with him."

"Is your sister, my brother's wife, with you in the convoy?"

"No." Ram Chand's voice faltered; tears filled his eyes. "She was with us when we left our home. I had my old mother on my back. She was following us. But she is not with us now." Ram Chand stuffed the end of his turban into his mouth to stifle his sobs. "My mother has been beating her breasts and wailing ever since."

Hamida felt her entrails turn inside her.

"You may be able to find her," continued Ran Chand. "We don't even know whether she is aliv or dead."

"Her name was Lajo, wasn't it?" Hamida ha heard the girl's name at the time of her engagemen

"Yes, it is tattooed on her arm."

The two talked on while the refugees slept and tl sentinels went round on their beat. Then Hami introduced the girl she had brought with her. want to leave this girl in your custody. Take h

into your convoy. When you get to India try to locate her parents." Hamida took the girl's hand and put it into Ram Chand's. Ram Chand looked at the girl and nodded. The girl shuffled from her place and sat behind him. A few minutes later she stretched herself on the ground and was soon fast asleep

"If I could have only seen my brother when he came here last time, I would have been very happy," said Hamida with a sigh.

"That time...when your fields in Chatto caught fire ! Do you remember ?"

"Fire ? Oh yes, I remember. Was it true then that it was my brother who did it ?" Hamida recalled Rashida telling her of the rumour.

"Yes. He had come to take you back—by force if necessary—but he could not find out where you were living. He was so enraged that he burnt down Rashida's crops"

Hamida felt a strange sense of pride in her brother. He had grown-up to be a man and had been filled with a desire to avenge the insult to his sister; he had not forgotten his Pooro. Hamida also realised that her brother had now lost his wife; someone had quite obviously abducted her. She was not only her brother's wife, she was also Ram Chand's real sister. And she was in dire peril.

"Drop me a card when you get to India and give me your address. If I can find out anything about Lajo. I will let you know."

They talked all through the night. The eastern horizon began to turn grey. The sentries started to awaken the refugees to get them moving. Hamida

stood up. She folded the palms of her hands, but no words issued from her lips. As she turned back, a police constable blocked her retreat with his staff.

"Where do you think you are going ?"

"I came to sell grain."

"How much did you get ? Show me the money."

Hamida put her hand inside her *dupatta*, took off her silver bracelet and showed it to the constable. He was satisfied and let her go. It did not cross his mind that Hindu women seldom wore silver ornaments.

* * *

Hamida spent many nights staring at the beams of the roof. In her thoughts she wondered over the plight of the women—people's daughters, sisters and wives—who were forcibly held by strangers under roofs like hers. Amongst many such, one was Lajo, Ram Chand's sister and her own sister-in-law.

Lajo had been married about a year. Maybe she had a child. How was the child faring ? What a misfortune had befallen the wretched mother ! If only the girl she had found in the sugar-cane field had been Lajo !

Hamida told Rashida all she had done and fell at his feet to ask his forgiveness. "Never before have I asked you a favour," she pleaded. "Find out about Lajo; you know how best to go about it."

Rashida took her hands in his; the gesture was enough.

Rashida had a strong feeling that Lajo was still in Rattoval. She had left her home with her brother but not been able to join the convoy. Obviously,

someone had grabbed her in the same village. Rashida paid two visits to Rattoval. He brought provisions from different shops to get information. All he learnt was that a gang had abducted a few girls from a passing convoy. And the conviction deepened in him that Lajo was one of those girls.

Rashida did not know anyone in Rattoval with whom he could stay and look around. Then he remembered the Holy Man who lived by the spring and had treated Rahima's mother. Hamida's eyes showed the strain of sleepless nights; so she had a good enough excuse to go to the spring after her morning prayers to wash her eyes. Rashida and his wife made a plan. They took their children with them and went to Rattoval. Hamida made her offering to the Holy One and then took a bundle of *khes* on her head to sell in the village.

* * *

During the day, when the menfolk were at work in the fields and the women busy with their daily chores, Hamida would boldly enter their courtyards and dump her bundle on the floor. She would ask a big price for her wares and seldom strike a bargain. In any case most village folk had a store of durries and *khes* which they had made themselves; and many had made quite a haul from the loot taken from Hindu evacuees. Nothing daunted Hamida and she went from one house to another. She peered into the rooms. She engaged the women in conversation and made jokes about what each had got away with. She asked them about the homes evacuated by the

Hindus and in this way was able to locate Ram Chand's place. Both she and her husband felt that the man who had occupied Ram Chand's house had also taken his sister, Lajo. Hamida had been to the house more than once, but each time an old woman had turned her away from the door, saying firmly that she did not want to buy anything.

One day Hamida forced her way into the old woman's courtyard. "Amma, you don't have to buy anything; just see what I have. I won't charge you anything for seeing my things." She dumped her bundle on the ground, untied the knot and spread out her wares. "May Allah bless you!" she said. "Give me a drop of water to slake my thirst. I've been out all morning and am parched!"

"You can have a tumbler of buttermilk instead of water. But if you want to sell your *khes* or bed-sheets, you should go to the city, where people neither spin nor card. There's no shortage of these things in the village," the old woman advised her. She turned round and shouted, "Good woman! Fetch a bowl of buttermilk!"

A young girl emerged from inside a room. She looked emaciated and walked as if in a trance. Could this be Lajo? "Isn't the girl keeping well?" Hamida enquired sympathetically, as she took the bowl of buttermilk from her hands.

"She is all right...just a little out of sorts," answered the old woman indifferently.

"Can I have a small lump of rock-salt to stir into the buttermilk?" asked Hamida after taking a mouthful.

The young woman fetched a lump of salt. While

taking it from the girl's hand, Hamida pressed one of her fingers. The girl looked somewhat startled but neither smiled nor spoke a word. She looked as pale as a stick of sugar-cane drained of all its sap. Hamida was sure that even if this was not Lajo, she had certainly been abducted.

Hamida drank the buttermilk. The girl came to take the empty bowl. Hamida quickly grabbed her arm : "Let me feel your pulse ; you look as jaundiced as turmeric," she said as she pushed back the sleeve on the left arm. She saw the name "Lajo" tattooed on it in Devanagari.

"Can you give her a charm or something—something which will make her feel more at home here ? She refuses to cohabit with my boy," said the old woman in a heavy voice.

"I have just the sort of charm she needs," replied Hamida promptly. "It will make her blossom like the grains of golden corn."

"I'll give you anything you ask. Please get it for me," pleaded the old woman, grasping the hem of Hamida's shirt.

"I'll bring it tomorrow, if Allah wills..." Hamida retied her bundle. The girl continued to stare like a deafmute.

Hamida told her husband all that had passed. "I leave the rest to you ; you know how best to act. Lift her away just as you lifted me on to your saddle," she said with a smile.

"It will not be too difficult to take her away from here, but how will we get her to join her family ?" asked Rashida. He also told her of the Government proclamation ordering people to hand over all

abducted persons, so that they could be exchanged for others similarly abducted by Indians. Parents had been exhorted to receive back their abducted daughters.

A sense of resentment surged in Hamida's mind. When it had happened to her, religion had become an insurmountable obstacle; neither her parents nor her in-laws-to-be had been willing to accept her. And now, the same religion had become so accommodating! Hamida put aside her personal feelings and began to think of Lajo's future. She lay awake a long while. She tried to calculate the time when the old woman would go out to the fields with *chapatis* for her son.

* * *

Next morning she put a pinch of ashes in a piece of paper and tied it in a rag. She took her bundle of *khes* and proceeded towards Lajo's house.

Hamida prayed to all the saints she knew. She also repeated the names of Hindu gods and goddesses. She often used to say that Allah was her step-father or she the step-daughter of Isvara, because neither the one nor the other had given a fig for her sorrows. But today she was too scared to jest about such things. She fervently invoked all the gods to help her in her mission and pushed open the door.

Lajo lay on a charpoy in the courtyard.

"Where is Amma?" Hamida asked as she stepped in.

"She's gone to the fields," replied Lajo sitting up. Her face betrayed an intense interest in the *khes* seller.

Hamida clasped the girl to her bosom. "You are *Lajo...my sister-in-law...!" she cried.* A cry of anguish welled up within Lajo—so intense that it would have pierced the walls and been heard across the entire countryside. But she did not let a sound escape her.

"Are you Pooro ?" she asked, disengaging herself. She had never met Pooro before, but she could see the close family resemblance between Pooro and her own husband Lajo lowered her eyes and then fell at Hamida's feet. Hamida did not have to ask any questions ; she simply hugged Lajo to her bosom again and again.

"Lajo, listen to what I have to say before someone turns up. What time does the old woman come back ?" asked Hamida.

"I don't know ; I know nothing !" cried Lajo. "Take me away with you !"

"What do you think I've come here for but to take you ?"

"Then take me away !" wailed Lajo.

"Get a hold on yourself, girl ! Where can we run to ?" She wiped away Lajo's tears with her *dupatta.* "Are you allowed to go out ?" she asked.

"No."

"Surely you go out to the fields in the morning ?"

"The old woman is always with me."

Hamida spoke after a pause : "Tonight happens to be a moonless night. If you can get to the well outside the village, my Rashida will await you with his mare."

Lajo shrank back with fear. She could not go out alone in the dark; she also did not know Rashida.

And if she was caught, it would be the end. "How will I get out of the house ?"

"Take your chance, when everyone's asleep."

"He drinks. I could give him a drop or two more tonight. But the old woman sleeps in the courtyard."

"Doesn't the old woman take opium or something to sleep with ?"

"I've never noticed."

"If only you can get to the well..."

"But...but I don't even know him. If you could be there..."

"He will get you away to safety during the night. If I were to come along, neither of us would be able to get away."

"I've never seen him."

"You must trust me. I will make him wear this ring on his finger." Hamida showed Lajo the ring she was wearing. Both the girls paused as they heard the sound of footsteps.

"Perhaps it's her !"

Hamida sat down on the floor and began to fiddle with the rag containing the ashes. The footsteps passed by the door and went down the lane. The girls resumed their conversation.

"I am terrified lest someone catch me on the way," said Lajo.

"What is written in your *kismet* will come to pass. But you couldn't be any worse off than you are. I think it's best that I move along now. If the old woman doesn't see me today, it will be better..."

"For God's sake take me with you !" cried Lajo and clung to Hamida like a child to its mother.

Hamida looked nervously at the door while she embraced Lajo. "Tonight...at midnight..." Hamida disengaged herself, gathered up her belongings and left.

Lajo stretched herself on the coarse string *charpoy*. She felt a new life pulsating in her limbs. She heard the walls echo the words "Tonight...at midnight..." She gazed at the brick flooring of the courtyard. "This was my home, the place where I was born, where I was married and from which my bridal palanquin was taken. I have come back to this very home. But all my relatives have gone and left my corpse behind to rot. I have become a stranger in my own home. The home which gave me birth has now become my coffin...but tonight at midnight I may regain my freedom!'

The old woman undid the latch of the outer door. "Has that *khes* seller woman been in? She promised to come today," she asked straight away as she entered.

"No," replied Lajo blandly.

The old woman sighed and flopped down on the *charpoy*. "Be a good girl and throw a palmful of *lentils and chick-peas in the cauldron*; I am fagged out."

Lajo rose with alacrity; she went about the task like one doing a final chore. She cleaned the lentils and rice and put them in a small can. She threw a handful of twigs into the hearth and lit a fire. It was usual for the old woman to knead the flour herself; *that evening Lajo put the flour through the sieve and* kneaded and baked the *chapatis*.

The day seemed as long as a year. At last the

shadow of the wall lengthened across the courtyard and the after-noon turned into evening. The old woman's son came home and Lajo did not turn up her nose at him as she had done in the past.

Three times the ladle with which Lajo was stirring the lentils and rice slipped from her hand; twice the rolling-pin escaped her grip ; then the copper drinking bowl crashed to the floor. "What's wrong with you?" shouted the old woman gourly.

"Can't you see what you're doing, or are your eyes made of buttons ?" added the son gruffly.

The old woman's temper did not upset Lajo, and her ears were deaf to the man's taunts. She was animated with a courage she had never known. Her mind was fixed on the moment which was fast approaching. It would soon be dark; everyone would be asleep; and she would slip out of the house as smoothly as a well-oiled wrist slips out of a bracelet.

Lajo hated touching the bottle of liquor and had always grumbled when the man ordered her to fetch it for him. The evening she got it without waiting to be asked. And she picked up his favourite double-distilled brandy, flavoured with cardamom, which he kept apart from the other bottles.

The old woman and her son were pleasantly surprised; she had fetched the liquor on her own and the lentils and rice were delicious. Perhaps she was coming round at last; perhaps she would share his bed that night.

The old woman began to nod with sleep.

"It's become chilly in the courtyard; I have put your *charpoy* indoors. Go to bed if you are tired." Lajo spoke like the mistress of the house. The old

woman's eyes opened wide for a moment. Obviously, the girl wanted to be left alone with her son! She went indoors to sleep.

The night advanced. The man was soon drunk. He grabbed Lajo's arm and drew her to his *charpoy*. Lajo did not resist.

Thus passed the first quarter of the night. Then liquor and sex took their toll. The man fell into a deep sleep and began to snore lustily. Only the walls, which had already seen so much, watched the mistress of the house slip out across the threshold in the silence of midnight.

Lajo had gone no more than a few steps when she felt she was being followed; she imagined invisible hands gripping her by the shoulders and choking her. Even in the cold, which gave her goose flesh, she began to sweat profusely.

She passed by the thick wall of her home into the dark, deserted lane. She turned off the lane and took the curving path which ran behind the mud huts.

* * *

Lajo came out of the village. Between her and the wall was an open area. A cold shiver rose from her bare feet up her spine to her forehead and spread through her body. She glanced back and saw the mud huts sprawling like tombs in a graveyard. She heard no shriek nor saw any phantom rise, but she could hear her own breath like a goldsmith's bellows. She had no time to waste. She looked up briefly at the twinkling stars and stepped into *the dark void.* She walked on with grim determination and looked back only after she had crossed to the other side.

No one followed her; behind her was the starlit void. She turned to the well. There was no one there. She walked round the parapet. She resolved in her mind that if Rashida did not come for her, she would jump into it.

A figure draped in a grey sheet emerged from a cluster of bushes. "Sister, are you Lajo?" The man uncovered his face as he spoke.

"Brother, prove your identity." Lajo looked Rashida full in the eyes. He seemed a kind man. She felt reassured. Rashida held out the ring for Lajo to see.

"I will get you to your destination and come back for Hamida tomorrow or the day after; the children are with her." He went back to the bushes and untethered his mare.

"Ya Allah!" muttered Rashida, as he helped Lajo on to the back of the mare. He mounted the saddle and dug his heels into the animal's flanks. It broke into a fast gallop. Rashida could not help recalling the time he had picked up Pooro from the dusty track. He was no longer as he had been then, but he still had strength in his arms. He remembered that when he had abducted Pooro, his conscience had weighed like a stone, which had become heavier and heavier. It had weighed on his mind for long. That night as the mare sped through the starlit countryside, the weight seemed to lift and he felt as light as a flower speeding in the fragrant breeze.

Before dawn, the news of Lajo's disappearance spread through the village; the women had not finished churning the buttermilk when they heard t[illegible] [illegible]rl had vanished. There were no Hindus

left in the neighbourhood; no Hindu could have taken her away. It could only be the deed of a Mussulman. But why should a Mussulman have done such a thing, they asked each other in bewilderment.

The sun rose. The smell of lentils cooking over cowdung fires, mixed with the smoke of dry camel-thorn burning in clay ovens, spread from evey house and enveloped the whole village.

The door of Lajo's home was wide open, like the jaws of a monster. Hamida stepped inside. The courtyard was littered with unwashed utensils, caked with flies. It was obvious that no food had been cooked in the house that morning.

"Have you seen that ill-starred wretch anywhere?" The old woman's face was wrinkled like crumpled parchment.

"Whom, *Amma* ?" asked Hamida, dumping her bundle of *khes* on the ground.

"That witch—may Allah punish her!" The old woman's face was puckered with hatred.

"Hai, hai !" exclaimed Hamida, clasping her hands. "Where is your daughter-in-law ?"

"Vanished ! May she burn in hell !"

"Hai, hai ; with whom ? I've got a charm for her."

"Throw it in the hearth. She's been taken away by a ghost or a *jinn*."

"Don't fret, *Amma*. Who could have taken her away from the village ? She must be somewhere in the fields."

"Rubbish ! How could she be in the fields so late ? It's almost noon."

"But *Amma*, she's not a morsel of bread which a crow could swallow !"

"That's what I've been saying. She might have jumped into a well, or drowned herself in a pond. I did not trust her from the first day. But the boy was so keen on her. He gave her too much freedom. He said she had no one to go to."

"*Amma*, where are her parents?"

"Ruin upon her parents! I warned him on the very first day that you can't build a happy home with stolen bricks. But who will listen to an old woman! He had lost his heart to the girl. And what's the point of keeping it a secret from you when everyone in the village knows—she was a Hindu girl. When the Hindus began to flee the village, my son abducted her. Allah is my witness, I said that very day, 'We should respect other people's daughters and sisters.' That is exactly what I said to him. 'My dear, most precious son, you've brought a load of sin into the house. How will we ever unburden our conscience of this crime?'"

"Now I understand why she always looked so scared! But where could she run away to? As they say, what escapes the crows falls to the kites. My own feeling is that she's fallen into some well or ditch. Either she's killed herself or her time had come."

"At least the blot of shame has been wiped away. Only that son of mine has been at me ever since. He says, 'Were you blind that you couldn't see her go? She was not a tiny sparrow's leg anyone could put in his pocket and walk off with!'"

"*Amma*, did she ever go out by herself?"

"On her first coming I used to lock the outer door whenever I went out to give my son his meal. Then the lad said, 'Where can the poor girl go to? If we

keep guard over her all the twenty-four hours she will never get to like our home.' She was left to herself for a short hour or two in the afternoon. Even yesterday, when I came back from the field, she seemed quite contented. I don't know what time calamity came and whisked her away."

"Have you had the wells dredged? She wasn't the sort who would go away with another. Have you looked into people's homes?"

"Since morning the villagers have been pouring in. They have scoured every inch of the land round about. Now my son, Allah Ditta, and some of his companions are looking in the wells. If they find her corpse, the boy will at least stop worrying about where she is. May Allah give my son long life! There is no dearth of women...."

Hamida put on a grave face and sighed as the occasion demanded.

• • •

A group of man came into the courtyard. "We've dredged all the wells without finding any trace of the girl," they said as they sat down on the *charpoys*.

"May all the sins be on her! Why do you look so sick?" Hamida realised why Lajo's face had worn the look of melancholy. Anyone caught in the talons of a kite as ugly as this would soon be reduced to a sparrow's skeleton.

"*Amma*, may Allah give you peace of mind! I must be going now," said Hamida, putting her bundle on her head.

"And who may you be?" asked Allah Ditta gruffly.

The bundle of *khes* made him suspicious.

"Who can she be but a *khes* seller ?" replied the old woman.

"I've not seen you in the village before," said Allah Ditta, in a tone full of suspicion.

"She's been coming round for the last many days," snapped the old woman.

"Where are you from ?" continued Allah Ditta in the same aggressive tone.

"I have two sons; I go from village to village and scrape a living." She wished she would grow wings and fly away.

"Are you Hindu or Muslim ?" Allah Ditta was as suspicious as ever. His companions began to smile.

"What have you in mind ?" asked one of them, prodding Allah Ditta in the ribs. "You want to take her into your house ?"

"Fie brother ! I am Hindu !" she drew her slipper towards her with her foot and put her bundle on her head.

"A Hindu doesn't have his name tattooed on his forehead, does he ?" growled Allah Ditta.

"Brother, will nothing clear your mind of suspicion ? Look, my name is Hamida," she said, drawing back the sleeve of her left arm and showing the tattooed letters.

"Go in peace, woman ! He is not himself today," cried the old woman from a distance.

"If I find any clues, I'll come over myself to tell you, Amma." Hamida went out as fast as her legs would carry her.

Rashida hired an *ekka* for the return journey and brought his family from Rattoval to Sakkar.

Lajo was waiting, her eyes intently on the door. As soon as she heard the sound of approaching feet, she rushed up and undid the latch. The family came in and bolted the door from inside. They huddled together like a terrified herd of deer in a jungle cave.

By the time they had finished their meal, it was fairly late. Rashida realised that the women wanted to be left to themselves to have a heart-to-heart conversation and removed his *charpoy* to another room.

The boys were put to bed. the women laid their *charpoys* alongside each other

"The refugee convoy from Rattoval passed through this village," said Hamida, opening the conversation.

"Did you see them ?" asked Lajo. She did not know how or why Hamida had rescued her

"I met your brother, that's how I heard about you."

"How did you recognise him ? You had never seen him."

"I had seen him once before," replied Hamida. She told Lajo of her meeting Ram Chand in the fields. She also told her how till the second meeting she had not known of Ram Chand's marriage to her younger sister. "I had not heard till the day the convoy passed through." After a long sigh, she continued, "People raise monuments to the dead, they have funeral feasts and make gifts in charity. Does any one as much as mention my name in my home ?"

Lajo told how, when Hamida's father had died the year before, her mother had often named her in her

mentations.

"My poor mother ! She first lost a daughter and ien her daughter-in-law !" The women broke own and cried.

"When you get back, ask my mother to see me at east once before I die," sobbed Hamida.

"I...I'll never get there."

"Oh yes, you will. You will go back to your home, your husband and your brother."

"I am no good for anyone now. No one will accept me."

"Lajo, I will never allow such wickedness while I live. You will certainly go back to your home. You were not to blame for what happened to you."

"What wrong had you done that no one of your family has acknowledged you to this day ?" asked Lajo.

"That's true. But then I was the only one. My parents did not have the courage to face the taunts of their neighbours and relations they had to stifle their instincts. Now, it's not just one or two, but hundreds of thousands that have been taken away from their kindred."

"No, Pooro this was my *kismet*, otherwise would not have been put to such shame. No on will ever come to fetch me."

"Oh yes, they will." Hamida assured her. "Whe my brother writes, we will send him informatic about you. What does my brother look like now

The question brought her husband's image befc Lajo's mind. How would she face him ? What wou the other members of the family say to her. S was convinced that no one would ever come for l

It was an imaginary spread from which she could eat to her fill.

"Lajo, someone is bound to come for you," repeated Hamida. "Today no one can taunt another. People are taking back their daughters and sisters. Rashida tells me that men are crossing into India to find their wives and are bringing them back. Some have even had children born to them." Lajo did not know why she had not conceived. It was a mercy, otherwise she would have been in a worse plight than at present. "So far our families have been mourning the loss of one, now they can mourn the death of two. Pooro, I have nowhere to go. What face will I show to anyone? I will look after your children and you can feed me."

"Don't talk like that and sprinkle salt on my wounds. This is your own home. But they are bound to come for you. I will get all the world to plead with them and persuade them." She took Lajo in her embrace.

"How are you faring?" asked Lajo.

"Rashida certainly committed a crime in abducting me. But thereafter he has been good to me. If he had not helped me, how could I have found you and brought you away?"

"He put his life in dire peril. If that monster finds out, he will break every bone in my body and then burn my corpse."

"They don't burn their dead, they bury them."

"Pooro don't you fear he'll find out and come for me? I may bring misfortune on your happy family."

"They have no clue; not even a trace of your shadow." Hamida told about her visit to the old

woman and her son after Lajo's disappearance. "I hid a Hindu girl in this very back room and no one knew anything about her. I left her with a refugee convoy. We'll keep you in hiding here without telling anyone in the village. As soon as we get a letter from India, we'll quietly take you to Lahore. No one will be any the wiser."

"What happens if no one writes for me?"

"My heart tells me your brother will not fail you."

The days went by: the sun rose and set with monotonous regularity, but nothing changed the tenor of Lajo's life. No one got to know where she was, nor did she receive any news of her family. Her only companion was Hamida. They talked late into the night, till they were heavy with sleep. Then their sleep was full of dreams. They woke in the early hours and resumed their stories; they told each other of their dreams and what they meant. Sometimes their spirits were low and at others, with as little reason, full of hope.

Hamida looked after Lajo as if she was an honoured guest, someone who had been entrusted to her for safe keeping for a few days and would then leave her ever. She saw in Lajo's face the faces of all the members of the family from which she had been torn away. She knew that none of them would ever come to her. Lajo was her first and last guest.

* * *

Winter gave way to spring. The water lost its chill. One afternoon Rashida came in and as soon as he saw Lajo and Hamida his eyes brimmed with tears. The two women rose and went to his side. For a

long while not a word came from Rashida's lips. Lajo's heart sank as she thought that the one thing she feared most had come to pass—the old woman and her son had got to know of her whereabouts and would drag her away by force. What would they do to Hamida and her family?

Rashida subsided on the *charpoy* and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. He patted Lajo affectionately on the back, as an aged father would pat his daughter when sending her off to her husband. "Ram Chand has come over today," he said

"Here?" the two women asked with one voice.

"Yes—with a posse of Indian and Pakistani police. I had word with him when we were by ourselves."

"Have they really come for me?" asked Lajo excitedly; then she felt a little abashed.

"Foolish one! What else would bring them here?" replied Rashida.

Hamida did not say anything, but she felt pleased that her faith in Ram Chand had been justified. Lajo would lose heart and at times even Rashida would despair; only Hamida had never given up hope.

"Is he by himself?" asked Lajo.

Rashida understood what she really wanted to know. "Yes, he's come alone. But don't fear—all your relatives will welcome you."

Lajo felt somewhat reassured

"I've explained to him that if we handed you over here, everyone in the village would get to know. And quite possibly the news might get to Rattoval. I told them to return to Lahore and wait for me to bring Lajo to them."

"You've done well," said Hamida.

"We have to be in Lahore five days hence. By then Hamida's brother will have come from Amritsar. I thought it would be a good idea if Hamida also meet her brother." Rashida put a gentle hand on Lajo's back.

Hamida began to cry. Lajo put her head in Hamida's lap and clasped her round the waist. They had in common their sorrows and tears mingled.

* * *

Next morning Hamida sent for some gram flour. She made candy with sliced coconut, dried fruit and the butter she had been saving. She made Lajo a new outfit of pure silk, as if the girl were her own daughter returning to her husband's home.

On the third day they left the village while it was still dark and caught the train for Lahore.

They met with police constables mounting guard about them. Lajo could not raise her eyes to her husband's. Hamida met her brother, knowing that this was to be at the same time their first and their last meeting; that an hour of reunion would be followed by a final separation. They felt helpless before the inexorable writ of fate. They had nothing to say to each other. All they could do was to cry like children and wipe their tears away with the backs of their hands.

"I beseech you, never, never let the slightest slur be cast on Lajo," Hamida was the first to speak.

Lajo's husband looked down shamefacedly; Ram Chand also kept his gaze fixed on the ground. After a while Ram Chand answered; "Pooro, do not shame us in this way."

Lajo's husband could not bring himself to say anything—nor perhaps had he paid attention to what they were *saying*. He was not only meeting the wife he had lost, he was also meeting a sister he had lost before he was old enough to remember. All these years a fire of hate had smouldered within him. He had used a spark from that fire to consume Rashida's *harvest and reduced it to ashes. And now the same* long-last sister was there, sitting in front of him. He overlooked the fact that Rashida had rescued his wife, Lajo ; his mind only dwelt on the fact that Rashida had abducted his sister.

The police van was ready. An Indian constable shouted : "All Hindus going over to India, come this side ! The bus is ready !"

Ram Chand embraced Rashida and repeated over and over again "Brother, you have been very good to us ; I'll never forget the obligation I owe you." Rashida's face reflected both pride and humility—*the first* because of the good turn he had done to Lajo, the second because of his having abducted Pooro. He felt that he had partly redeemed the *debt of honour he owed on that score.*

Another voice shouted : "Hindus bound for India, this side !"

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Hamida put the silk clothes and the candy in Lajo's hands, embraced her warmly many times, *then suddenly* clasped her brother to her bosom.

"Pooro !" said her brother, grabbing her by the arm. "This is your only chance...." Hamida understood what he was saying and for a brief mo-

was overcome by temptation. She knew she had only to say that she was a Hindu and they would put her in the bus and take her back to her people. Like Lajo, like thousands of other women in the country, she too could.... But she made her brother release her arm, turned back to where Rashida was standing and clasped her son to her bosom.

"When Lajo is welcomed back in her home, then you can take it that Pooro has also returned to you. My home is now in Pakistan," she said to her brother.

"Whether one is a Hindu girl or Mohammedan one, whosoever reaches her destination, she carries along my soul also," Pooro said to herself and made a last vow by closing her eyes.

The bus started on its journey, leaving the deserted road in clouds of dust.

Translated by Khushwant Singh

was so much as to say, "I give you my daughter to take the place of the one who died. Don't cry any-more. I've even dried your wet towel."

This is how Angoori married Prabhati. However, their union was postponed for five years, for two reasons : her tender age, and her mother's paralytic attack. When, at last, Prabhati was invited to take his bride away, it seemed he would not be able to, for his employer was reluctant to feed another mouth from his kitchen. But when Prabhati told him that this new wife could keep her own house, the employer agreed.

At first, Angoori kept *purdah* from both men and women. But the veil soon started to shrink until it covered only her hair, as was becoming to an orthodox Hindu woman. She was a delight, to both ear and eye. A laughter in the tinkling of her hundred ankle bells, and a thousand bells in her laughter.

"What are you wearing, Angoori ?"

"An anklet. Isn't it pretty ?"

"And what's on your toe ?"

"A ring."

"And on your arm ?"

"A bracelet."

"What do they call what's on your forehead ?"

"They call it *aliband*."

"Nothing on your waist today, Angoori ?"

"It's too heavy. Tomorrow I'll wear it. Today, no necklace either. See ! The clasp is broken. Tomorrow I'll go to the city to get a new clasp... and buy a nose pin. I had a big nose ring. But my mother-in-law kept it."

Angoori was very proud of her silver jewelry,

elated by the mere touch of her trinkets. Everything she did seemed to set them off to maximum effect.

The weather became hot with the turn of the season. Angoori too must have felt it in her hut where she passed a good part of the day, for now she stayed out more. There were a few huge *neem* trees in front of my house; underneath, an old well that nobody uses except an occasional construction worker. The spilt water made several puddles, keeping the atmosphere around the well cool. She often sat near the well to relax.

"What are you reading, *Bibi*?" Angoori asked me one day when I sat under the *neem* tree reading.

"Want to read it?"

"I don't know reading."

"Want to learn?"

"Oh no!"

"Why not? What's wrong with it?"

"It's a sin for women to read!"

"And what about men?"

"For them, it's not a sin."

"Who told you this nonsense?"

"I just know it."

"I read. I must be sinning."

"For city women, it's no sin. It is for village women."

We both laughed at this remark. She had not learned to question all that she was told to believe. I thought that if she found peace in her conviction, who was I to question them?

Her body redeemed her dark complexion, an intense sense of ecstacy always radiating from it, a resilient sweetness. They say a woman's body is

like a lump of dough ; some women have the looseness of underkneaded dough while others have the clinging plasticity of leavened dough. Rarely does a woman have a body that can be equated to rightly kneaded dough, a baker's pride. Angoori's body belonged to this category. Her rippling muscles impregnated with the metallic resilience of a coiled spring. I felt her face, arms, breasts, legs with my eyes and experienced a profound langour. I thought of Prabhati : old, short, loose-jawed, a man whose stature and angularity would be the death of a Euclid. Suddenly a funny idea struk me : Angoori was the dough covered by Prabhati. He was her napkin, not her taster. I felt a laugh welling up inside me, but I checked it for fear that Angoori would sense what I was laughing about. I asked her how marriages are arranged where she came from.

"Girls, when five or six, adore someone's feet. He is the husband."

"How do they know it ?"

"Her father takes money and flowers and puts them at his feet."

"That's the father adoring, not the girl."

"He does it for the girl. So it's the girl herself."

"But the girl has never seen him before !"

"Yes, girls don't see."

"Not a single girl ever sees her future husband !"

"No...,"she hesitated. After a long pensive pause, she added, "Those in love...they see them."

"Do girls in your village have love affairs ?"

"A few."

"Those in love, they don't sin ?" I remembered

her observation regarding education for women.

"It's a sin, a great sin," she replied hurriedly.

"They don't. See, what happens is that a man makes the girl eat the weed and she starts loving him."

"Which weed ?"

"The wild one."

"Doesn't the girl know that she has been given the weed ?"

"No, he gives it to her in a *paan*. After that, nothing satisfies her but to be with him, her man. I know. I've seen it with my own eyes."

"Whom did you see ?"

"A friend ; she was older than I."

"What happened ?"

"She went crazy. Ran away with him to the city."

"How do you know it was because of the weed ?"

"What else could it be ? Why would she leave her parents. He brought her many things from the city : clothes, trinkets, sweets."

"Where does this weed come in ?"

"In the sweets: otherwise how could she love him?"

"Love can come in other ways. No other way here ?"

"No other way. What parents hate is that she was that way."

"Have you seen the weed ?"

"No, they bring it from a far country. My mother warned me not to take *paan* or sweets from anyone. Men put the weed in them."

"You were very wise. How come your friend ate it ?"

"To make herself suffer," she said sternly. The next moment her face clouded, perhaps in remembering her friend. "Crazy. She went crazy, the poor thing," she said sadly. "Never combed her hair, singing all night...."

"What did she sing ?"

"I don't know. They all sing when they eat the weed. Cry too."

The conversation was becoming a little too much to take, so I retired.

* * *

I found her sitting under the *neem* tree one day in a profoundly abstract mood. Usually one could hear Angoori coming to the well ; her anklet bells would announce her approach. They were silent that day.

"What's the matter, Angoori ?"

She gave me a blank look and then, recovering a little, said, "Teach me reading, *Bibi* ?"

"What has happened ?"

"Teach me to write my name ?"

"Why do you want to write ? To write letters ? To whom ?"

She did not answer, but was once again lost in her thoughts.

Won't you be sinning ?" I asked, trying to draw her out of her mood. She would not respond. I went in for an afternoon nap. When I came out again in the evening, she was still there singing sadly to herself. When she heard me approaching, she turned around and stopped abruptly. She sat with hunched shoulders because of the evening chill.

"You sing well, Angoori." I watched her great effort to turn back the tears and spread a pale smile across her lips.

"I don't know singing."

"But you do, Angoori."

"This was the...."

"The song your friend used to sing." I completed the sentence for her.

"I heard it from her."

"Sing it for me?"

She started to recite the words. "Oh, it's just about the time of year for change. Four months winter, four months summer, four months rain...."

"Not like that. Sing it for me," I asked. She wouldn't, but continued with the words.

"Four months of winter reign in my heart;
My heart shivers, O my love.
Four months of summer,
Wind shimmers in the sun.
Four months come the rains;
Clouds tremble in the sky."

"Angoori!" I said loudly. She looked as if in a trance. I felt like shaking her by the shoulders, as if she had eaten the weed Instead, I took her by the shoulders and asked if she had been eating regularly. She had not; she cooked for herself only since Prabhati ate at his master's. "Did you cook today?" I asked.

"Not yet."

"Did you have tea in the morning?"

"Tea. No milk today."

"Why not milk today?"

"I didn't get any. Ram Tara...."

"Fetches the milk for you?" I added. She nodded. Ram Tara was the night watchman. Before Angoori married Prabhati, Ram Tara used to get a cup of tea at our place at the end of his watch before retiring on his cot near the well. After Angoori's arrival, he made his tea at Prabhati's. He, Angoori and Prabhati would all have tea together sitting around the fire. Three days ago Ram Tara went to his village for a visit. "You haven't had tea for three days?" I asked. She nodded again. "And you haven't eaten, I suppose?" She did not speak. Apparently, if she had been eating, it was as good as not eating at all.

I remembered Ram Tara: good-looking, quick-limbed, full of jokes. He had a way of talking with smiles trembling faintly at the corner of his lips.

"Angoori?"

"Yes, *Bibi*."

"Could it be the weed?"

Tears flowed down her face in two rivulets, gathering into two tiny puddles at the corners of her mouth.

"Curse on me!" she started in a voice trembling with tears, "I never took sweets from him...not a betel even...but tea...." She could not finish. Her words were drowned in a fast stream of tears.

Translated by Raj Gill

A Soundless Shriek

KARMO RECEIVED THE buttermilk in her brass pot, but glanced at the half-empty container with disappointment. She looked at the young lady of the house and said, "Didn't see *Sardarni* today. Hope she's O. K."

Sardarni Nihal Kaur stepped into the kitchen that same minute. She stoked the fire to get the right temperature for the rice pudding cooking in the pot. "Veero," she chided, "you don't cook pudding on a strong fire. A slow fire for pudding, always." She set a flat stool by the fire and, sitting down, removed the lid and stirred the pudding with a ladle. She had churned the curd earlier in the morning and while straining it had instructed Veero that the buttermilk was for the poor who come for it. She herself, in the meantime, wanted to rest a while.

Nihel Kaur did not know whether the low-caste people who came earlier had also inquired after her health, but she did hear Karmo.

"I'm fine, Karmo. How are you ?" she said from the kitchen.

Karmo edged nearer to the door and peeped in. "All blessing on you, *Sardarni*. I didn't see you today. Thought maybe you weren't well."

"All the people held Nihal Kaur in great esteem, and she knew it. But when someone went out of his way to stress this point, there must be some reason behind it, she thought. She noticed Karmo had deliberately tilted the neck of the pot towards her. Nihal Kaur got the hint.

"Veero, fill her pot. She has many mouths to feed."

"May God give you more," Karmo said receiving an additional dole. "So much sweetness from your hands that the kiddies always want a second helping." It was Veero who gave her more buttermilk, but the whole of Karmo's attention was on Nihal Kaur.

But Nihal Kaur remembered that Karmo had addressed her as *Sardarni*, a promotion from the *Bibi* she was just yesterday. Who could have been the first to think of calling her *Sardarni?* Perhaps everyone all at once had thought to do so; eneryone from the charwoman to the manager of her husband's factory, and all the low-caste people in the town as well, were addressing her as *Sardarni*. Even her husband had called her that just yesterday. She remembered too that only two days ago he had told the charwoman to fetch *Bibiji* from her room.

With the arrival of a new wife, Nihal Kaur thought to herself, naturally he'd promote me to *Sardarni*. Her new status caught her fancy and carried her away for a moment. Besides, Veero, the new wife, would invariably look into her bedroom before retiring at night. She would sit for a long

time at the foot of Nihal Kaur's bed, pressing the old woman's feet. Nihal Kaur did not have any children; hence, no daughter nor daughter-in-law. But when Veero came in each night to say good night, Nihal Kaur realized in her both a daughter and a daughter-in-law.

She had herself chosen Veero as a second wife for her husband. There were offers from notable families, to be sure; but these were aimed at getting her husband's property. They did not ignore the old man's age and wanted him to will all his property to their daughter as a precondition to marriage. He wanted to marry again to have an heir, but would not turn over the property for the mere promise of one.

At one point, he had given up the thought of a second marriage entirely. He became very sad She wanted to rid him of this sadness and to make him happy again. She found Veero for him and thus removed the sadness from his heart and locked it in her own.

"Where's *Sardarni* ?" he asked Veero one day, annoyed. He was standing puzzled and angry before the wall safe. She was not at home. He told Veero to have Nihal Kaur call him at the factory the moment she returned. When she did come home, Nihal Kaur found Veero sitting by the tap in great distress. The girl had just thrown up.

Nihal Kaur rushed to her and massaged her back, then led her to bed. But Veero slid down to the floor and grovelled at her feet.

"*Sardarni*," Veero implored, "one day you called me both your daughter and daughter-in-law. I beg

you today to stand by your word and save me." She confessed tearfully that some time before, her brother came to her in desperate need of money. She lifted the safe key from *Sardar's* pocket and gave the silverware in it to her brother.

"It's your own house, Veero. If you want to throw it away, you may." Nihal Kaur answered. Veero cut her short.

"This never has been my house, and it never will be. But I promise you, *Sardarni*, I'll never give anything from this house away, so help me God. I did wrong and I'm sorry now. You know that my father married me off to him for two thousand rupees...to an old man for two thousand rupees," she repeated, a shiver in her vice. "What sort of father and brother do I have that they'd sell me like that," she asked bitterly. "Why should I ever help them !"

"Veero !" Nihal Kaur cried out, startled.

But she did help Veero. She told the *Sardar* that she had taken the silverware from the safe to replace them with more modern ones.

The *Sardar's* worry was over, but a new one started for Nihal Kaur. She became aware of it whenever she looked at Veero. The girl's eyes had the dark boldness of a bumble bee; her complexion was slightly dark, but her flesh was kneaded like sculptor's clay, setting of her youth to every advantage. Nihal Kaur feared that Veero might bring a second sorrow to the *Sardar*. She had already taken his first sadness upon herself.

Then fortune smiled upon Veero. Greetings and congratulations from well-wishers flooded the house.

The *Sardar* experienced a strange bouyancy in his life, for an heir was on its way. Veero became a a cherished, protected being.

"I'm adopting him from birth," Nihal Kaur announced to Veero. "I don't want any argument from you about it later. I'm the senior here and the first-born ought to be mine. Have another one for yourself, or as many as you like."

Sometimes Nihal Kaur wondered why she did not experience regret or sorrow instead of excitement. Her marriage to the Sardar was her second. Now surely his entire estate would go to the child of this new woman, her competitor.

"You angel," Veero would say, "What a lucky day for me I took you as my mother and mother-in-law. I can't feel any other way about it." Sometimes she would add, "*Sardarni*, whether I'm something to you or not, I know for sure that I'm not competing with you."

Nihal Kaur rejoiced. She had a cradle made to order with silver bells and pure silk lining She even ordered two fine sweaters from England through a European friend who was going back on a month's leave. She had never promised an offering to the gods to get herself a child, though she did consult all available gynecologists and *vaids*. But when Veero discovered a spot in her third month, Nihal Kaur promised a rich offering to the gods on Veero's behalf.

It was time to be vain and spoiled. If Veero wanted, she could have had the moon. The *Sardar* was ever ready] to attend to her, but Veero, out of shyness, would seek Nihal Kaur's permissi

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for a piece of pickle. Therefore, the old woman had to keep guessing at the girl's needs and desires. Only once throughout her pregnancy did Veero venture a demand, and that too, was not to get something for herself.

"Get rid of those turnips strung up to dry in the sun. They smell like rotting flesh." Veero would almost fall sick at the mere mention of turnips.

Something came over Veero in her ninth month. She wanted to have her first child at her parents. The *Sardar* would not agree to it. Even Nihal Kaur could not get around Veero, who insisted that she would entrust herself to the midwife in her parents' village—and no one else. She was convinced that if she went to the town doctor, she would die. The doctor insisted that this obsession was not good for her. But the *Sardar* had a different obsession. He took Nihal Kaur aside and confided, "I think there's some funny business going on here. If it's a daughter, they might replace it with someone else's boy to get my property. It has happened many times before."

"The only remedy," Nihal Kaur replied, "is that I go with her. With me around, they won't try anything."

He agreed. Veero too did not put up any objection. Nihal Kaur ordered the housemaid to accompany them.

Nihal Kaur did not let Veero's parents consider either of them a burden. She spent money without restraint. Everyone addressed her as *Sardarni*.

For a first delivery, Veero did very well. Her sisters-in-law used to joke with her about it. "What's there to be afraid of? Just shriek once and you

have a boy. That's all."

"One shriek and it's a boy...but what if it's a girl ?" Nihal Kaur asked.

"Two shrieks," quipped one of Veero's sisters-in-law.

"Two for a daughter ?"

"Well, one for the pain, the other for the sorrow. Only sons bring joy; not daughters."

Nihal Kaur experienced an intense pain at this explanation. "I won't shriek...not once, not twice... never," she thought sadly, But she kept the smile on her face and swallowed her bitter realization.

When the labour pain started, Veero bit her tongue and shrieked not even once. She whimpered once, and after that, the midwife looked up toward Nihal Kaur and said, "Congratulations, *Sardarni.* Come here and I'll fill your lap with a son." Nihal Kaur received the son and the congratulations.

But when the next day she wanted to telegraph the news to the *Sardar*, Veero stopped her, holding her feet and pleading, "*Sardarni*, I can lie to the whole world, but not to you. This isn't the *Sardar's* child."

"Veero !" Nihal Kaur said, shocked almost to dementia.

"I don't owe the *Sardar* anything, but I do to you. If this child would have to play in the *Sardar's* house alone, I wouldn't have cared. But I can't let you adopt him."

"What are you saying, Veero ?"

"It was all a joke, but it backfired on me. I really don't regret it, but I do feel sad for you."

"Veeroooo..." Nihal Kaur cried.

"You remember when I came to stay with my parents once last year? Your *Sardar's* clerk came with me. The rumour was all over the village that my parents had taken money to marry me to an old man. No one here had seen the *Sardar*; you remember, my father married me off in the *gurdwara* in your town. People there could say anything they liked. When I returned here, all the women were asking lot of questions. I put them off by telling them that this young, good-looking clerk was my husband. He went along with the game; he even bought silver rings for his sisters-in-law, as he was supposed to. We played our parts for the time I was here, though in the end, I actually began to believe that I was married to him and not to the Sardar."

"Our clerk, Madan Singh?"

"I'm not going back to the *Sardar* again. The child isn't going either. That's why I insisted on coming here. I know I'll suffer for my sins. I only ask, *Sardarni*, that you don't tell on the clerk. The *Sardar* will can him for sure."

"But he's married already, with two kids, Veero."

"That's what I'm worried about. If he's fired, his family will starve. He isn't going to marry me; I know that. But I don't hold anything against him either. I do owe him one thing: at least I've had someone young make love to me."

Nihal Kaur shut her eyes in sudden fear. When she opened them; she saw the baby sucking at Veero's breasts. She felt as if it were not the mother's milk the child was drinking, but rather the heavy

sadness from the *Sardar's* heart that she had taken from him, and now Veero had stolen from him.

Translated by Raj Gill

Five Dames

AN EAGLE WOULD come flying over their heads every evening at 5 o'clock, swoop down upon their eyes and grabbing a lump of cheese lying before them it would fly away.

Thus their eyes were pierced every day.

"Has it come?" One of the dames asked while stepping into the verandah.

"It might...." replied the one already standing there gazing at the 'IN' gate as if she was closing it with her eyes.

While looking at the road the third one wondered how the road she had dismantled in the dream was still intact.

The fourth one stared not at the road but at the stairs were no one could be seen but one's shoes.

Short in height the fifth one could see not only the shoes of someone but the bottom of one's trousers also.

All of them threw a glance towards the sky as if they were reporting the incident to the police.

Soon after a car dashed through the 'IN' gate, slowed down as it entered the porch and within

minutes it rushed out.

Standing in the verandah of the second floor the dames felt nervous as if they were about to run over by the can. All of them stared towards the porch in such a manner as if an accident had really *taken place there.*

It happened every day except Sundays.

Traditionally this tale would be related thus :

There was an office, a Boss and his five stenoes.

It was a very big office having many sections and every section was headed by a *Section Incharge.* But unofficially *he* managed the whole office.

He held such a commanding position that he would visit any office any time, ring up the staff room and ask any dame to see him in the office. The girl would take it as a token of luck.

Soon she was seen walking into his office with the file having the word 'Urgent' invisibly inscribed on it.

He was called *Badshah Salamat.* And his five stenoes were his court dancers. Besides being perfect in the art of dancing, a dancer is supposed to be well mannered, well behaved and well clad. Similarly every dame would dress up immaculately and stylishly before starting for the office.

They talked, walked and behaved as gracefully as they could. And the one who was *called in* his office would immediately take a small mirror out of her purse and check up her makeup as if she would arrange documents in the file.

He would sign the papers, advise her for another job and return the file. The day he gave good remarks on the satisfactory work, was consider to be the most auspicious one.

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Some one of them had been in service for five years and some for six years. But none had any grievance against the Boss. Their only urge spoken or unspoken was to continue in this office.

This year a mop of grey hair had grown on his head. The girls admired it as most graceful. He still retained his titles such as 'Roman Figure', 'Greek beauty', 'Angle Face Eternal Youth', 'Living God etc....

The dames remained spell-bound as long as they were in the office and under its influence they happily dispensed with the extra work even during the lunch hours. It broke only at 5 o'clock in the evening when his wife would appear on the scene with a car.

Though they had associated black colour of the car with the feathers of an eagle, one day they dropped it as they thought it to be apostrophized with the false culture and they straight away linked it with his wife.

She would come exact at five, pounce upon their eyes and deprive them of their hard earned right within a tick.

As the word cheese they had associated with their right, had vegetability in its content, they replaced it with the pound of flesh. What a sensation the words eagle and flesh created in their bodies they never spoke out to each other.

After the spell had broken the girls would walk sluggishly to the bus stand to go home.

The spell was exactly like the Sun that sets in the evening and rises in the morning. As soon as they reached the bus stand in the morning they were

again hail and hearty.

This was the mode of life the dames had ultimately accepted. Suddenly there occured an incident. His wife expired. The girls exchanged this with each other excitedly as if they were trying to confirm it.

For complete one week before her death she was not seen due to her sudden illness. But the girls would not believe her to be dead and still awaited her arrival as anxiously as before.

The days passed and they were convinced that she was really dead. Now his car stood in a corner the whole day. At five he would leave his office, get down and drive home without stopping for a moment.

At the close of the office the girls would come out in the verandah as usual, bid him good-bye in their hearts and walk up to the bus stop. Though this pattern of their life had no conspicuous change, it seemed to be steadily breaking from within.

"How like an eagle did she hover over us."

"Yes...our evenings were extremely boring."

"At last we have cursed her to death."

And they gigled in chorus. But in the course of time they stopped talking about her.

Now they felt envious of each other. The one who was called in the office was suspected by the others and charged with treachery. As long as she stayed inside his office, the time hanged heavy on them. The moment she came out, they would observe her face in such a manner as if trying to locate some secret.

Every morning as they reached the bus stand they

would examine each other and thought the other to be exceptionally smart.

"O...h...how wonderful ! When did you buy this *sari* ?"

"How beautiful is your purse ! I haven't seen it before ?"

"I think it took only half a meter cloth to make your blouse."

"Your back is still bare. Only a hook is there ."

"Don't worry, I will not hook him."

The one with the backless blouse blurted out.

That day all talked about her blouse. Even the Boss had this news.

Six months passed. The day came when all the dames were dismayed to know that he got married to an English woman. Instantaneously the colourful files seemed to have turned black, slipped from their hands.

In the evening some foreigner, probably his second wife, came in the car, got down for a moment and taking him with her she drove away.

"It is a foreign culture this time."

One of them squeaked. But in response none said anything. It appeared that the stamina to speak something was lost to them.

Dragging their feet wearily towards the bus stand they felt as if they had suddenly grown old.

Translated by Baldev Mirza

Letter from Guliyana

SO MANY LEAVES covered the twigs, but still there were no flowers. Everyday I studied the small bush, searching for *Champa* bloom. Will it ever come? Oh, I know that the gardener had scoffed at my trying to grow a *Champa* in a pot. He swore it could only bloom when its roots dug deep into the earth. Today, I bowed to his knowledge and took the plant from the pot. As I settled it finally back in the garden, a lady appeared suddenly near the garden wall.

"You cannot guess how far I have come, looking for you, asking for you," she complained in a breathless voice.

Puzzled, I studied her, looking into a pair of deep grey eyes. "I do not know you."

"My name is Guliyana," she spoke wearily as she leaned against the wall. After a moment, she spoke again this time more passionately. "For the last two years I have been walking; my feet weigh like lead, but when I heard about you, I knew that I would walk again to find you; I must know you." She spoke with a heavy accent, Slavic I thought

did not tell me why she wanted so much to know me; I did not ask.

"For two years! You must have come from far away?" She was slight of build, almost fragile. Catching the doubt in my voice, she nodded emphatically. "Yes, for two years. My homeland is Yugoslavia; I have been in India for just one month; yet in that time I have heard your name again and again. Your name has sounded through the mouths of many whom I have met. I knew I could not go from India without knowing you, so I have walked about looking for you since early yesterday."

Again she did not say why; again I did not ask. Brushing the garden dust from my hands, I led Gulivana into the house. "Come, we shall have some tea." As I washed my hands at the kitchen sink, I watched her look about the living room. Then as I set the water to boil, she sat down near the window. Her hands rested quietly in her lap as she continued to look out at the sky. While I prepared the tea and arranged the tea tray, two cups, the sugar bowl, the milk pot, she did not move or speak. I brought the tray to the table near her. A lock of her brown hair had fallen across her brow: her glance was clear and sweet as I brushed it back. "What are you looking for, Guliyana? Even feet of lead become tired of bearing a yoke—though of beauty and youth."

Her first answer was a sigh as she stirred her sweetened tea, but then she smiled. The light in her eyes shone with confidence and laughter. "Like you, I write...Oh, I haven't written any yet, but there is so much I wish to write. First, before I can, I must

look at the world. I started with Italy, then France, then Persia and Japan, now India—still there is so much to see. Heavy feet or not, it is not time to be tired."

I watched her face tighten with determination, "But someone must be waiting for you back home."

"My mother."

"Your letter must be giving her great pleasure."

"Perhaps. But each one she calls the last. She does not think another will come."

"But why ?"

"She does not like my walking over the world. Somewhere, on my way, she believes death is waiting for me." She sat silent, watching the sparrows fly through the open window in search of crumbs. "But still she reads my letters," she spoke almost to herself. Then turning to me, she smiled, "I write very long letters to her ; she cannot see, but friends read them to her. She sees the world through my eyes."

I watched her as she sipped her tea. She was very beautiful. I could not understand her calm, driven as she was to walk the world. "But in all your travels Guliyana, did no place stretch out its arms to stop you ? Didn't your heart ever whisper : "This is it ; don't go any further ?"

"How I wished that some place should stop me, hold me, bind me, but...." her voice dropped almost to a whisper in its yearning softness

Still I wondered and probed : "Was there no hand or life with that much strength ?"

"I did not find it ; could my expectation from life be too much ?" She pondered her question, her head

dropping forward. Turning suddenly towards me, she exclaimed: "But I speak in riddles to you. Maybe, it is true that what I look for cannot be found. But there are reasons, and I will try to tell you."

I waited while her eyes looked through the wall of my house, perhaps through my country.

"I began my life in the struggle for freedom in my own land. In 1941 when we revolted for the people's rule. I became a rebel. I was very young then. For the next four years, my life was full of struggle. With others like me, I spent many months in mountain camps. When the enemy found us, we had to move and move again, from mountain caves to forest hide-outs. One night, I remember, we walked sixty miles."

"Sixty miles?" I was amazed. "There is untold strength in that delicate frame of yours."

"That was just one night out of many, but then we walked together, three hundred of us together. It takes more strength to walk it alone." Abruptly, she turned away with a shake of her head. "Come on, let's stop this and talk of pleasant things. Sing me a song of your land." I could not think then of any song. I wanted only to understand."

"I have no song for you now, Guliyana. Why a song? Have you written songs?"

"For a while I did, then something happened and the songs within me withered. Maybe they will bloom again; I don't know." She shook her head sadly.

"What kind of songs, Guliyana? Love songs perhaps?"

Again she shook her head, this time impatiently.

"Not now. But if I ever do again, I will sing only of the free blossom springing from the earth. Love cannot grow in the narrow limits of a garden pot."

Remembering my *Champa*, I gazed at her in wonder. Could it be that Guliyana, too, could only find her fullness from the whole earth? Could the earth repay her for it's long withdrawal? I wondered silently.

"But such an expectation is, I'm afraid, more than the need." Her eyes were bleak as she looked at me.

"No, no," I protested, "the need is only sufficient if it equals your heart's desire. That is never too much, Guliyana."

She smiled sadly, "The heart's desire has no equal." She sat silent, her head to one side. Again she began to speak slowly, as if it needed an effort. "We have a folk song—

Page boys carry your bridal chair,
Who will carry your coffin?"

Her grey eyes bored into mine. "Who, indeed, will carry my coffin?"

For a moment I studied the bitter-sweet expression on her face. "Have you never loved anyone, Guliyana?"

"I have felt something but I know now it was not love. Love would have endured beyond life. My beloved would have desired me as I did him. I even married him believing in our love. But such a marriage confined my life. My heart ceased to bloom in a narrow pot. I need the wideness of the earth."

"But this earth...," my words died before the ›ntempt that blazed in her eyes.

"Are *you* afraid of this earth ?"

I smiled. "No, Guliyana I am not afraid—the arth is warm and fertile but...."

"I know the thing that frightens you," her voice ›roke harshly over mine. "It frightens me all the vay I have come. I will not let fear keep me from blooming in the earth." Her hands clenched into fists, "I challenge all those who would deny me a place on the open earth ! Woman was put here to fulfill herself." Her voice broke in a sob of pain. "Why should a woman always endure the brutal attack of men ?"

I knew her pain. I had suffered in the same way. "Have you found it like this everywhere you've gone ?"

"I felt worst in Persia, I wanted to see so many things, but my hotel people asked me not to go anywhere alone, even in the daytime."

"What did you d· ?"

he was drunk."

Then it seemed that she was no longer talking to me. I lay back among the cushions on my couch as her words flowed around. "In France a heavy rain prevented a bad situation. I had walked into the country and was resting in the garden of a small inn. Two men had been following me for some distance. A short way beyond the inn, the road wound steeply up a mountain. I wanted to go on, but though they loitered on the road behind me they seemed like obstructions in my way. I was afraid and then my heart burst in anger. Why should my fear of scoundrels keep me from my desire? I left the mountain. I had gone only a little way up the slope when suddenly the clouds opened and the rain poured down heavily, I returned to the inn. The men were gone, but my heart burned at such fear. Man pretends to be civilized but still nurses somewhere such great beastliness."

Tears welled in her eyes as she sat near me on the *divan*, her clenched fists kneading a cushion near her. I had another question, but refilled her cup and waited while she sipped the hot strong tea. At last she shrugged a little with a smile. "Tell me, Guliyana, how do you manage your life? Do you work?"

"Oh yes, I write short travel sketches for a paper at home. They pay me a regular fee. My French is good, and I have done translations into my language. When I go home again I will write a long travel memoir. Maybe, I will write songs again." She smiled ruefully at her last remark.

Her voice was almost a whisper as she leaned

towards me, "You know, in my sleep a song enters into my heart, but when I wake up, its fluttering ends, I cannot find a trace of it."

"Tell me only of that song, Guliyana ; everything else is unimportant," I pressed her arm urgently.

"Not even the song itself but its purpose," she answered.

I nodded, "Yes, yes, the purpose—that is what I want to know. It is for that purpose that songs are born. Without it I can make a couplet rhyme, but there I stop. How can you make a song without it ?"

Guliyana smiled wistfully, then speaking slowly, she recited.

"Today who rent the sky
Today who fetched down the bouquet of stars
And tied it round my waist
As a bunch of keys is tied."

She clasped her hands to her waist. "Sometimes I know those stars are here," she whispered.

My heart was stirred. She had refused the common silver key ring, the restraints and rules of common keys. But, I wondered, where and when a house would be built that called for a chatelaine of stars. She glanced at me quizzically, "You are so quiet. What are you thinking about ?"

"Do women in your country also wear keys at their waists ?"

"Yes, keys remind us of home." She mused a moment, "Home is woman's eternal dream." Walking to the window she looked out on the garden, still

and dropping under our fierce Indian sun. "Look, how far I have come in search of that dream's reality." She turned towards me, her hands extended. "Now, I abandon that dreams as a security for my songs." Her open hands fell to her sides.

"And you put the earth in your debt." At the word 'debt' Guliyana laughed not gaily but not bitterly either. She laughed with the resignation of a creditor who knows the debt can never be paid. Then she became silent and leaned against the window frame

Watching her I considered how her description must read :

Name : Guliyana Saynoria
Father's Name : Nikolipan Saynoria
Birthplace : Macedonia
Height : 5 feet 3 inches
Hair : Brown
Eyes : Gray

Identification Marks : Beauty spot, lower lip; small scar, left eye-brow. But what did such a cold catalogue tell of Guliyana ? Nothing of the truth, a true description would read something like this :

Name : A woman fragrant like flowers
Father's name : The dream of a man
Birthplace : This fertile earth
Height : Star's cluster round her waist
Hair : Earth-coloured
Eyes : Like a summer sky

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